

Kenkyo, Kenjitsu o Motto ni Ikite Orimasu

I Will Live with Humility and Dependability as My Motto

**- Volume 5 -
(Chapter 152-215)**

**-Author-
Hiyoko no kēki**

[Oniichanyamete]

Chapter 152

Urashima Tarou is a Japanese fairy tale.

Long ago, a man named Urashima Tarou found a turtle on the beach being tortured by a group of children, and rescued it. Later, while he was fishing on a boat as always, the grateful turtle came and told him he would carry him on his back for him to see the underwater palace known as the Dragon Palace. At the palace, the princess, Otohime, thanked him for saving the turtle, and was entertained for many days with a rich feast and dances performed by various sea creatures.

But remembering his mother and father and feeling homesick, he bid his farewell to Otohime. The princess tried to dissuade him from leaving, but finally let him go with a parting gift, a mysterious box called tamatebako which he was told never to open.

When Tarou returned to his hometown, everything had changed. His home was gone, his mother and father had perished, and the people he knew were nowhere to be seen. Thinking that opening the box might do some good, and not remembering the princess's warning, he lifted the lid of the box. A cloud of white smoke arose and touched his face, turning him to a wrinkled old man, his hair and beard turned completely white.

For the boys' baton relay, Kaburagi's team formed a huddle and gave a warcry. Uwah... One team was very out of place here...

The starting signal fired and the athletes all shot off at once. Ohhh dear! Team Kaburagi's first runner was trying too hard and tripped over! His baton went flying through the air! Even if he ran to pick it back up, he just lost Team Kaburagi some crucial seconds in the race. Uwahh, uwahhhh, I couldn't imagine how he was feeling right now...

When that boy finished his lap his face was sheet white. Anybody would be. But Kaburagi just slapped the boy on the back in consolation. He even whispered something in the boy's ear. I guess he wasn't angry about the mistake. Thank goodness, boy-I-don't-know.

When it was Kaburagi's turn, as the anchor of the race, his team was in 4th place thanks to the Spartan-like efforts of every runner since. Kaburagi took the baton in hand and began running like the wind, immediately passing somebody to 3rd place. Before long he caught up to 2nd place, and then brought himself in range of 1st place. He was so fast!

The crowd roared in excitement. The goal was just in front. Could he do it? He did *ittttt!*

When Kaburagi broke past the goal tape all of his runners ran up to surround him. Ah, the first runner was openly crying. He must have felt so responsible... Kaburagi saw him and smiled with a thumbs up. Yet another person joined the Kaburagi Cult that day.

My next game was the ball-toss. Since it was a team game there would be no accommodating for me! I'd show them I could win for real!

I looked to see who our opponents were only to notice that Wakaba-chan was standing next to Enjou of all people. Eh-, Enjou was going to be competing in the ball toss!?

With Enjou standing next to her, hitting him with the sacks accidentally would be too big of a risk. Even the girls who had come in determined to throw balls at Wakaba-chan gave up and meekly aimed at the basket like they were supposed to.

Could it be that he was looking after her? Was it a coincidence?

Unremarkably, we came 3rd place.

The costume race was held in the afternoon. I was looking forward to seeing *just* how Iwamuro-kun would look after they were done with him~

One by one, each class filed out.

"Hmm!?"

Even though my class was supposed to be the Town Musicians of Bremen, for some reason every animal had a head of roll-like locks.

What the heck was that supposed to be!?

“Class Rep! Class Rep!”

“What’s wrong, Kisshouin-san?”

It was so strange that I came all the way over to demand an explanation.

“Why do all of those animals have that strange hair attached to them!?”

“Ohh, that. It’s supposed to be your hair, Kisshouin-san.”

I knew it!

“You’re the face of our class, so I guess they wanted to show that off? Hm, or maybe more like honour you? Mmn, something like that.”

“Something like that, you say... I have heard nothing about this, you know!”

“Aaah, well, I guess they thought that you’d tried to stop them if you knew. Sorry, Kisshouin-san. I mentioned to our class about how Iwamuro-kun was wearing a wig in your hairstyle, but then they got weirdly competitive. You were in *their* class, so Iwamuro-kun was intruding, or something like that.”

“Are your heads on right?!”

What were these guys smoking?! And anyway, their wigs weren’t anything like the quality of Iwamuro-kun’s. Rather than the Rococo Queen they looked more like the King of Reggae!

Look! They were getting weird laughs already! It even felt like *I* was being laughed at!

“Kisshouin-san, the race is starting. C’mon, let’s cheer.”

Even if he told me that, I couldn’t bring myself to cheer properly for those animals with the weird rolls attached to their heads.

“Oh! Iwamuro-kun came out!”

Iwamuro Wendy burst forward with splendid golden locks and a sky blue dress. In no time, he overtook the Reggae Artists of Bremen. The one in the full-faced donkey mask was clearly dragging the team down. Must have been oxygen deprivation.

Actually Wakaba-chan was competing too. The theme that her class picked was Urashima Tarou. Behind Urashima Tarou and Otohime was Wakaba-chan, plastered head to toe in sea bream, and snapper, and other sea creatures. Wakaba-chan...

I had wanted to say a few words now that my classmates were finished with the costume race, but my three-legged race was coming up next. I decided instead to use these feelings to fuel my performance in the race instead.

While I was heading to Ru'ne-chan and thinking about the difference between ringlets and dreadlocks, Kaburagi approached me from in front.

"Kisshouin!"

And for some reason called out to me. Ru'ne-chan was showing consideration in a weird way again, and put some distance between us.

"Kaburagi-sama."

As always, there was a huge crowd of girls gathered around him from a distance away. Was he the Pied Piper of Hamelin or something.

Kaburagi placed a hand on my shoulder. The girls around us started squealing in response.

"I finally realised your ultimate goal for these school festivals. You're trying to complete the Chinese Zodiac, aren't you!"

"Huh? Zodiac?"

Suddenly grabbing me and then talking about ultimate goals, or the Zodiac... As usual I had no idea what this guy was talking about.

Kaburagi paid no heed to my confusion though, and nodded to himself knowingly.

"You weren't competing in the costume race this year so I thought you had run away from the nose problem. Who would have thought that you'd be using copies of yourself to compete instead. Last year were the rat and sheep, and now this year you have the Bremen animals. It didn't take long for me to realise you were aiming for the Chinese Zodiac."

“Haaah!?”

What the hell was he on about?! Was he actually an idiot!? Not once had I thought about completing the Chinese Zodiac in costume since the day I was born!

And to begin with, look carefully! Wasn't there a cat in the Bremen animals? There was no cat in the Chinese Zodiac! Everyone knows that the Rat had cheated the Cat out of it!

And why was he nodding to himself again!? No, stop, stop coming up with your weird conclusions. It's scary!

“You made up the numbers this time, so you might make it before graduation. Well, do your best.”

Satisfied, he pat me on the shoulders before walking away like some war hero. Come *baaaaack!*

By no means was my goal in high school life to complete something as stupid as the Chinese Zodiac in costume! Don't lump me in with athletic carnival maniacs like you! No normal person behaves like this! Wait, Kaburagi!

“Um, Reika-sama... I'm sorry for interrupting while you're still feeling moved and all, but if we don't hurry...” Ru'ne-chan said hesitantly while I was frozen on the spot. Huh? Moved?

I guess they couldn't really hear our conversation over all of the cheering.

I could hear girls here and there commenting enviously, ‘Kaburagi-sama came to cheer Reika-sama on’.

You're wrong!

“Isn't that great, Reika-sama?” said Ru'ne-chan.

You too!?

The only thing that happened was that an idiot arbitrarily branded me as some strange woman who was fixated on completing the Chinese Zodiac in costumes!

Thanks to Kaburagi I was feeling out of it during the three-legged race and didn't do as well as I'd hoped.

"It's a shame," consoled Ru'ne-chan, "After Kaburagi-sama came to cheer you on too."

I told you, that wasn't it...

There might have been troubles along the way, but the Athletics Carnival moved into its final stage. It was time for the cavalry battle. The teams trained by Kaburagi were raring to go. This was what everyone had been waiting for. Even Kaburagi was standing watch with folded arms.

Fellow Stalking Horse appeared. The cheering got even louder. Even though he had bad blood with the Pivoine President, Fellow Stalking Horse was popular. Why. Was it the face?

"Mizusaki-kun!"

"President!"

"Princeeee!"

Prince?

Apparently Fellow Stalking Horse had been nicknamed 'Prince' without me hearing about it. Prince... I guess maybe based on Prince Arima of Asuka?

The real Prince Arima was tragic, though. Was that okay? Oh, but I suppose Prince Arima was like a stalking horse as well. I guess that actually made it the perfect nickname then? They gave off completely different images though. Not that it would fit the likes of Afrodite better.

Anyway, Prince Arima took the headbands off his opponents, one by one. His aim was none other than the teams trained by Kaburagi!

But the two teams surrounded him. Despite that, he grabbed the headband of one with his right hand, and used a daring headbutt to crush the other.

There was even a standing ovation for his gallantry and prowess. Even Kaburagi, who had just seen his personally trained team crushed, was standing there clapping with a

grim expression.

Ahh geez. He was frowning now. I thought this last year too, but if he wanted to be involved this badly why not just compete?

And as pained as his expression was, it all just seemed stupid once you remembered what it was about.

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Prince Arima was son of Emperor Koutoku. It is said that Emperor Koutoku was blessed with his heir, Prince Arima, because he stayed at the Arima Hot Springs in Hyougo Prefecture.

He was accused of, and executed for treason. In part due to two famous poems that he wrote shortly before his death, he is remembered in Japanese culture as a tragic hero.

As for another prince accused of something similar, Prince Sawara was the heir presumptive to the throne when his older brother was inaugurated as Emperor Kanmu. There were plans to move the capital city but Prince Sawara was opposed, and implicated in the assassination of a key individual, Fujiwara no Tanetsugu, supposedly in order to overthrow the court with the aid of the Ootomo and Saeki families.

His brother, Emperor Kanmu, confined him in Otokunidera Temple, and then exiled him to what is now somewhere in Hyougo prefecture, but Prince Sawara died from causes that are still disputed.

After his death though, things did not go well. The Empress Dowager and then the Empress died in succession, and the new Crown Prince, Ate, fell deathly ill. Divination revealed that the cause was Prince Sawara's vengeful spirit.

In fear, Emperor Kanmu posthumously awarded Prince Sawara the title of crown prince, and then soon afterwards was posthumously raised to the rank of emperor, and bestowed the posthumous name Sudou(‘崇道’, Path of Worship).

Changing just two strokes in the character 崇(worship) gives you 祟(curse).

Incidentally, Kisshouin(吉祥院) literally means ‘house of good fortune’.

While the Athletics Carnival was over, there was still something I couldn't accept. After the Athletics Carnival, I went and asked the costume race team why they had worn reggae curls.

The story they told me was shocking. Earlier I had used Kaburagi's costume criticism from last year as an excuse to get out of participating. Apparently the boys had actually believed me, and decided to humour Kaburagi's expectations by going in my place. What the hell. So it was *him* again? So it was all *his* fault again!?

One of the boys even happily told me that that athletics carnival maniac had told them that it was a funny idea. And then the boy said,

"Actually, he also told us to do our best because the 'dragon' and the 'serpent' were going to be difficult. Do you know what he meant?"

The Chinese Zodiac again!

Huh? But if I was trying to complete the Chinese Zodiac Set, did that mean Wakaba-chan was trying to complete some kind of ocean set? During the excursion in first year she played the sea in the play. First the sea, now the fish. I wondered what she was going to do next. Seaweed...? Boats...? Wai-, was the idiocy contagious!? Now *I* was thinking like that idiot too!

Nooo, I didn't wanna complete the Chinese Zodiac...

I still didn't know who had come up with it but the nickname 'Prince' had managed to stick, at least among some people.

The Arima Onsen was a great place, wasn't it~ Japan's oldest hot spring. In my old life I'd enjoyed bath salts from the Arima Hot Springs in my family bath, but since I was rich this time around I had gone to the real thing.

Haahh, it was a great trip. My skin was silky smooth when I got out of the water. And the eggs cooked in the hot springs that I had for dinner that night were delicious too! Onsen-boiled eggs were an excellent idea. They went great with caesar salad!

Going back to the nickname though, was Fellow Stalking Horse okay with this? Being nicknamed after that tragic prince I mean. On the other hand, I suppose the Pivoine was lucky that he wasn't named Sawara. Curses were scary.

This school, or rather my grade, was oddly fond of nicknames. We had 'the Emperor', 'the Prince', 'Afrodite'... Hm, and I suppose my... 'Goddess' or something?

Mmn, I still didn't really get it but the boys called me Goddess for some reason,

according to Satomi-kun. I mean, I suppose I *did* have a certain refinement that could remind people of a goddess. Actually calling me a goddess was stretching it though. And kind of scary, besides.

And I still wasn't sure which goddess they meant. The goddess of happiness, Kisshouten(吉祥天) maybe? It was just a character away from my surname. It was the same sort of thing as the 'Prince Arima' nickname.

Oh, speaking of which, Kisshouten was known as a goddess of beauty too, wasn't she. Not that it really meant anything. I just happened to remember, that's all. Really.

No sooner had the Athletics Carnival ended did the mid-term exams arrive. Last time I was rank 30, and the time before that rank 29, so I wanted to get onto that ranking board again this time! Sure, it was *not* a good sign that my rank was actually going down with time, but I was hoping that the studying I did during all those trips to the library would kick in.

I sat down at my desk and opened up my textbook. I wonder if Wakaba-chan was studying right now~

You know, Wakaba-chan's family wasn't poor or anything. For one thing they were living in an actual house, and for another their cake shop was doing pretty well in their area.

By no means were they using milk cartons as flower vases, or saving their bath water in plastic bottles for later use. I saw no signs of such money-saving techniques.

Well, not that I had actually seen them taking their baths, but at the very least they hadn't done that in the manga.

Just the other day they were using the aircon when I visited.

It was just that she had a lot of siblings. After Wakaba-chan was two younger brothers, and a younger sister, so four of them in total. That's why Wakaba-chan was trying to save money by becoming a scholarship student at Suiran, in preparation for her siblings' futures. She was a really filial girl.

Her younger siblings were a naughty bunch, and weren't attending Suiran.

"Uwah! This oneechan's hair is like chocolate cornets or something!" was the first

thing her brother said when seeing me.

“Owww!” was the second thing because Wakaba-chan had immediately smacked him across the head.

The Takamichi household really seemed like a fun place.

Mmn! I decided that I would follow Wakaba-chan’s example and study. I was going to cling to the ranking boards with everything I had!

That was the mindset I faced the exam with. I think I did pretty well, for me at least. For me at least...

Anyhow, during the days after the test when I was waiting eagerly for the results, I was spending all my time on the Bea-tan doll. There was only about a month left until the School Festival. I needed to finish it on time.

Thanks to Sasajima-san’s help the torso was done, as were the arms and legs now. All that was left was the face, but it just wasn’t going too well. I had made a number of them but all of them were different to the Beatrice photos. And thanks to the regular photos that Umewaka-kun sent, I already had Bea-tan’s face memorised anyhow.

Maybe it was the position of the nose and eyes... And I hadn’t added the curled hair yet, so maybe that’s why it looked different. The plan was to add on Bea-tan’s iconic curls later, in order to avoid tangles.

Maybe I’d talk to the Handicrafts Club for some advice.

Finally, it was the day of the results. As for my own results... Ohh! 28th place! I went up! And by two ranks, compared to last time! You’re amazing, Reika!

“Goodness, Reika-sama! *28th* place! That’s spectacular!”

“Reika-sama was 28th place! Last time you were 30th, weren’t you? That’s wonderful!”

I was basking in the glow of the compliments from Serika-chan and the others.

“Thank you, everyone. But is 28th place a good score, or an average one, I wonder... I am not quite sure myself.”

“Goodness, I think that’s a splendid achievement already. You probably don’t understand since you don’t have much interest in these things though.”

“She really doesn’t. Reika-sama, you should be a little more proud of your own achievements, you know?”

“Goodness...” I replied.

Ohohohohoho. Praise me more.

Still, there were plenty of people beyond me. This time 1st place was taken by Kaburagi again, with Enjou in 2nd and Wakaba-chan in 3rd. Sometimes I wondered what was inside of their skulls.

Wakaba-chan had learnt from her past experiences. She was standing there looking at the rankings, but her mouth was set in a straight line, and not an speck of celebration could be seen on her face. But. Wakaba-chan, your nostrils are twitching in excitement, you know.

I’ll bet she was happy. She was probably thinking of the scholarship bonus that she was getting again.

She told me a while back that on days when she received a bonus she would quietly treat herself to one of the luxury items on our cafeteria menu. Good for you, Wakaba-chan.

I wondered what she’d get this time. This month’s theme was nouvelle cuisine.

“You’re *amazing*, Wakaba-chan!” exclaimed a student council member.

“Ehehe, thanks.”

Apparently Wakaba-chan had grown close with some of them since entering the Student Council. Sometimes I spotted her with them.

“Looks like I lost to you this time, Takamichi,” sighed Fellow Stalking Horse in good humour.

He was 4th.

“Ah well. Try harder next time,” she said.

“*Somebody* sounds damned confident,” he joked.

The two of them seemed pretty close as well. It was good that she wasn’t alone. The looks she was getting from Prince Arima fans were pretty harsh though.

That was when Kaburagi and Enjou came along. Although the people around them made a fuss about their arrival, they just came, looked at the results, and then casually walked away.

Wakaba-chan was still talking to Fellow Stalking Horse. I did not miss the glance that Kaburagi gave her as he walked away.

I wonder how Kaburagi actually felt about her...

With the Athletics Carnival and the mid-terms over now, all anybody had on their minds was the School Festival. My class was doing a Chinese tea café this time. I had a bunch left over from that time with Ichinokura-san in Taiwan. Hopefully I contributed something with the idea.

Besides that was the preparations for the Handicrafts Club’s exhibit. I was the Club President, so I couldn’t be dragging us down now, could I!

Alright! Leave it to me, your Club President, everybody!

And my first job as Club President was to get my own exhibit ready. Today I brought my Bea-tan doll to school, hoping to get everybody’s advice.

Before heading to the club, I popped into the salon for a bit to have some tea. I looked into my bag at the doll. I had what I thought were the three best heads with me, but which would I go with~? Personally, I thought all of them were cute, but...

While I was sitting in the corner of the salon, holding each head up to compare, Kaburagi suddenly came over with a confused look on his face.

“The heck is that? The Cerberus?”

Haaaaaahhh!? Fight me, damnit!

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I was furious. Kaburagi had called Bea-tan, the crystallisation of my efforts all these months, some guard dog of Hell.

The Cerberus!? Was he trying to imply that I was committing the deadly sin of gluttony or something!? Was Bea-tan guarding the third circle of Hell or something!? In the Divine Comedy, Beatrice was Dante's love you know! How could you call her the Cerberus!? Apologise to Mr. Dante Umewaka! Pape Satàn, Pape Satàn aleppe! Damn you, Kaburagi! Go to Hell!

I picked up the bag as I cursed him internally and fled from the Salon. I needed somebody to vent to!

When I arrived at the Handicrafts Club, I began telling them all about my Bea-tan project, and the photos, and the three heads and everything. Whether or not it actually looked like Bea-tan, it was still so cute, so how dare he!

My club members gave me vaguely worded sympathies.

"Three might have been a bad number..." said one of them.

She might have been right, but look! Look at how cute! How could you call it the Cerberus just because it had the right number of heads!

"There there, Reika-sama," my former club president gently consoled me, "You should just make a doll adorable enough to surprise him. I'll help out too. You want the face to look like the dog in this picture, right?"

That was it! This wasn't the time to be feeling indignant about that athletics carnival-loving idiot. What I needed to be focusing on was getting this Bea-tan doll looking as close to the real thing as possible! First I needed to choose which of the three heads to use!

"Reika-sama, it might be better if you don't pace around with animal heads in your hand..."

Huh? Oh.

I took the former Club President's advice and instead started to fix up the heads.

"By the way, Reika-sama, tomorrow the club presidents are all meeting to discuss the School Festival."

Speaking of which, there *was* something like that going on, wasn't there. Was it some meeting to decide what each club would be doing? I'd never gone before so I wasn't sure.

"Is there anything that I should know?" I asked.

"No, not particularly. The agenda is mostly which rooms we'll be using, but usually it's the same as the year before. The budget is already decided as well. I think you should be fine just going along with it."

"I see."

So it was just a formality then. Still, you could say that this was my first battle as the President of the Handicrafts Club. I wouldn't be much of a club president if I didn't take this seriously. Everything was for the club!

"I will apply everything I have in order to protect this club from harm."

I flashed her a cheerful smile.

After school the next day, the lot of us met up. Every club president was in attendance, and officiating the meeting was the Student Council.

It was actually my first time learning who the presidents were for a lot of the clubs, you know? I hadn't ever had that much interest in clubs. I had no idea that Class Rep was the president for the Literature Club.

The presidents of the culture clubs were sitting quietly in their designated spots. On the other hand, a lot of the delegates from the sports clubs were being pretty noisy. It was rather irritating, but they were from famous clubs that did well in competitions, so I supposed it was to be expected.

The meeting progressed as expected until it was time to discuss the room allocations.

The former Club President was right; they were planning on handing out pretty much the same rooms as last year. I hummed to myself as I looked down at the handouts for the meeting.

But suddenly, a number of the sports clubs assigned areas outside began to complain.

“Yanno, if we’re stuck outside we’re at the mercy of the weather. Dontcha think it’s time for us to get a room inside?”

“Yeah, what he said. Don’t you have any free classrooms anywhere? A big one, obviously. I mean, that’s fair, right? Our club is doing well every year.”

“Our club has done quite a bit for the school, so I think we deserve a bit of flexibility.”

“Aren’t there a bunch of clubs that nobody visits anyway? Why don’t we just put them all in the same room so that other people have some space too?”

“Oh, good idea! There’s Photography Club, the Literature Club... Oh, and the Biology Club too.”

“Don’t we have like Go and Shougi Clubs too? What do those guys even *do* for the School Festival?”

“Beats me. Like an exhibit or something?”

Each president went rigid as their club was named. Fellow Stalking Horse tried to warn them with an “Oi,” but they were already too carried away and continued like nothing. Honestly...

I opened my bag and began to unseal my weapon.

“Hardly anybody visits them anyway, so you should just make them place their exhibits in the same room. If we had those rooms, wouldn’t our clubs more than make up for the popularity?”

“What other clubs were presenting exhibits? The Art Club, the Calligraphy Club...”

“Yeah, and there’s also the Handicrafts Club!”

I used his words as the cue to stand up and audibly slap my fan onto my palm.

“What was that about the Handicrafts Club?”

Suddenly, the room froze over. There was no sign of the clamour about taking the rooms of the clubs with exhibits any more.

With a smile, I looked at the faces of the offending presidents, one by one.

“Just a moment ago I had the strange feeling that somebody mentioned the Handicrafts Club. Did somebody have some business with it? Ah, my apologies. I forgot to mention. I am the President of the Handicrafts Club. Pleased to be here.”

“Eh...?”

Apparently none of the noisy ones had been aware that I was the club president for the Handicrafts Club. They looked awfully startled behind those stiff expressions. I guess they let their guard down since Pivoine girls usually joined the Flower Arrangement or Tea Ceremony Clubs. I notice that they never saw fit to mention the Flower Arrangement Club despite it doing an exhibit for the festival as well. The fools!

The main perpetrators were the presidents of the Soccer Club, Baseball Club, and Basketball Club. Every one of them was a prided club of the school that performed well in inter-school competitions. I wouldn't be surprised if that was the reason for their arrogance today.

But no matter how well their clubs were doing, none of that mattered at all. What did matter was that today they had made an enemy of my Handicrafts Club.

I leisurely made my way to them. The sound of each slap of the fan was clear in the silence of the room.

Slap. Slap. Slap.

I began by standing behind the president of the Soccer Club. He tried to turn around, but I restrained him by placing my fan on his right shoulder. He had no choice but to face forward as he sat there stock still, with my fan now tapping his shoulder.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“The Soccer Club is doing well, I hear.”

“Ye-... Not really..”

“Now, now, no need to be humble. Even I have heard about your splendid results in the inter-school championships.”

“I’m flattered...”

“I wonder, though...”

I stopped tapping my fan and instead stopped it right on his carotid artery.

“It is all well and good to reserve a shop for your celebration party, but as minors should you not be respecting the law? Say, Club President, how was it anyhow? Getting drunk on the taste of ‘victory’?”

“Eh...”

Next, I made my way over to the president of the Baseball Club and placed my fan on his shoulder.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“The training in the Baseball Club is incredibly tough, I hear. I wonder, though... Could the rumours I hear about beating members for mistakes be true? Society does not look kindly on corporal punishment these days, does it. Some schools would even ban offenders from playing, you know?” I said, tapping his carotid artery and holding the fan there in time with the last line.

Last was the Basketball Club.

Oh my, no need to look so scared. I only have one line for *you*.

“You laid your hands on your senpai’s girlfriend, did you not?”

After verifying that the three statues were subdued, I leisurely made my way back to my seat. When I sat down, I smacked my closed fan onto the desk.

“Now then,” I said before giving the Presidents of the Soccer Club, Baseball Club, and then Basketball Club a look in turn, “Going back to the previous conversation, I believe you were saying something about room allocations? You must forgive me, I seem to

have forgotten. Could you kindly say it once more for me?"

"...The Soccer Club is fine with their booth being outside."

"...The Baseball Club too."

"Same for us..."

Not one of them looked me in the eyes as they replied.

"Truly? But I seem to have heard the names of other clubs such as the Literature Club, though...?"

"No! The Soccer Club is fine being outside!"

"Actually, the Baseball Club *prefers* being outside!"

"We want the outside even if it rains!"

"Goodness! What gentlemen! What kindness and magnanimity to turn over the rooms to our pitiful culture clubs! Why, the gallantry that you have demonstrated has me positively quaking in emotion."

I covered my mouth with my fan as I gave an 'Ohoho' of victory.

Fellow Stalking Horse sighed, whilst Wakaba-chan watched blankly with her jaw hanging.

Ooohohoho!

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When the meeting was over the presidents of the targeted clubs approached me with thanks. Yup, yup, to a culture club the School Festival was their only chance to shine, after all. Completely unlike people who just manned refreshment booths for fun! Just how much time do you think I've put into my Bea-tan doll!

For a while I thought I was going to get another lecture from Fellow Stalking Horse, but in the end he never said anything. I guess he decided to turn a blind eye this time.

Anyway, it was time to get to the Handicrafts Club. Recently I got an email from Beatrice.

'Have you finished the Bea-tan doll?

Bea-tan looks forward to it!

You have to make me really cute, okay!

Bea-tan wants to see soon~

Do your best, Reika-tan!

~ From Beatrice'

I was feeling the pressure now.

Never would I be able to tell Umewaka-kun that I turned her into the Cerberus...

Not only was I the President of the Handicrafts Club, I was also the vice-rep of my class. Thanks to that the day of the School Festival was going to be hectic for me, since worrying about the food and tea and costumes etc. for our café fell to me as well.

The menu we were using was decided when I brought samples of the teas I bought in Taiwan and had some of the more knowledgeable members of my class try them. Who would have thought that my xiaolongbao trip to Taiwan would come handy in a way like this~

I wonder how Ichinokura-san was doing, anyhow. Since that day I was declining his invitations in consideration of his girlfriend so I wasn't too well-informed. Maybe I was being ungrateful after all the delicious food he treated me to. Mao-chan had asked me to come to the Petite Pivoine a number of times, so I supposed I could visit her and ask how his life was going.

I immediately headed to the Petite Salon. Walking through the primary section's school building I could hear song and music from here and there. Instead of the School Festival, the primary school held the Learning Presentation instead, where the students would do things like hold plays or sing in a choir, or present the results of their research for the parents to see.

I worried that Mao-chan would be busy as well, but she mentioned earlier that she would be at the salon today.

I picked up my pace a little when I bumped into Katsuragi Boy turning the corner.

"Ah! It's you!"

"My, why if it isn't *you*, Katsuragi-kun. Long time no see."

He had gotten quite a bit taller compared to the year before when I last met him. It wasn't going to be simple to hit his head anymore. What a shame.

"Why are *you* here!?"

"Because I have business here, obviously. I seem to meet you quite often in the hallway. Don't tell me I have a stalker?"

"As if! Who would bother stalking *you*!?"

"A noisy fellow as always, aren't you. Well? What are you doing here? Ahh, wait, don't tell me. Your grades were so bad that they had to drop you back into primary."

"None of your business!"

"I see. Well then, gokigen'yoh."

"Ah-! Hang on!"

I tried to leave but he called out to me.

“What’s the matter?”

“You better not be getting close to Enjou-san.”

“Haah!?”

Katsuragi Boy frowned.

“The girls in middle school are gossiping about it. Apparently you two are close...”

“Haah!?”

Close!? With whom!? Excuse me, but I don’t remember ever getting close to him.

“I can’t say I know very much about these rumours, but Enjou-sama and I are hardly in the relationship you’re worrying about. Please continue pining for him as you have been.”

“Wha-!? Pining!?”

“The reason you always seem so fixated on him is because you secretly harbour feelings towards him, correct? I personally don’t see why you feel the need to hide it from me. I pride myself on tolerance to minorities.”

“Fuck off! Stop coming up with weird shit on your own!” he screamed with a bright red face, “I just can’t stand letting somebody like *you* loiter about him! And I’m not a homo either!”

“Ah yes, of course. Don’t worry, I believe you.”

“What’s with that tone! You don’t believe me at all, do you!?”

Uhuhu, what should I do? This Bird Boy was too amusing. He was so fun to tease.

“To begin with, a woman like you-!”

“What are you doing?” called a cute voice.

Yukino-kun was standing behind me.

“Goodness, Yukino-kun!”

But Yukino-kun ignored my happy call, and stepped between the two of us with a harsh expression before suddenly holding his arms up at Katsuragi Boy.

“A boy shouldn’t be bullying girls!”

Eeeehhhh!?

“Umm, Yukino-kun...?”

“Uh, I wasn’t bullying this...”

“You *were* bullying her! I heard you shouting at her! A boy should always treat girls gently!”

“Y-Yukino-kun!” I cried.

Oh my god! Yukino-kun was protecting me! I was so moved! I’d never been protected by a boy like this before. Oh my god!

“Let’s go, Reika-oneesan!”

As I suffered from a phantom nosebleed, Yukino-kun gallantly pulled me past Katsuragi Boy by the hand.

“Eh, but...” muttered Katsuragi Boy.

He seemed to still be in quite a shock about Yukino-kun being angry at him. I kind of felt bad for leaving him like that. To begin with, I wasn’t being bullied for one thing.

But Yukino-kun must have thought that I was scared of Katsuragi Boy because as he led me away he turned his head to comfort me with a smile.

“Don’t worry! I’m here to protect you so everything’s going to be okay.”

I decided just to leave the misunderstanding alone.

This is the result of how you usually behave, Bird Brain. Accept it already.

Anyhow, if inside Yukino-kun's head I was some delicate girl, then I wanted to stay that way. He said he would protect me! That was the first time anybody outside of my family had said that to me!

I ended up smiling goofily all the way to the Petite Salon. So much that I ended up worrying Mao-chan. Sorry, that must have been creepy, right? Time to snap out of it. I hardly wanted the cute kids of the Petite Pivoine to change their impression of me.

"Yukino-kun, you are acquainted with Katsuragi-kun?"

"Yes. Sometimes he comes over to my house."

"I see."

"I don't really get along with him though..."

Hmmmmmm...

"About earlier however, I was not in fact being bullied by him, you know?"

"Really?"

"Yes. He is simply a loud person by nature, so he is easily misunderstood. Still, you made me very happy when you said you would protect me. Thank you, Yukino-kun."

He seemed a little bashful to hear that. What a good boy!

Apparently he was going to be playing the piano for the Learning Presentation. An angel playing the piano! That was something I had to see!

Speaking of seeing, Yukino-kun and Mao-chan were coming to our high school section's School Festival too. Maybe I would see them. But as Enjou's little brother, a visit from Yukino-kun might cause a pandemonium. If that happened, it would be my turn to repay the favour from just now!

Mao-chan said that she would be visiting the School Festival with Ichinokura-san. Unfortunately for him, he was still being called Ojisan... Do your best, Ichinokura-san! Hold out for the day you become Haruto-niisama again!

Sakura-chan invited me out the next time I was free. According to her, my negligence had resulted in some girl buzzing around Akizawa-kun. Uwahh...

Chapter 156

Sakura and I visited a chocolatier.

This store had a high class (and indulgent) chocolate parfait that it was well known for.

People often said that chocolate calmed the nerves, didn't they. By all means, please let Sakura-chan eat some. Come, Sakura-chan.

Mmhu~ Yummy. Luxuriating in the taste of parfaits is the best.

"There's been a girl trying to get close to Takumi," she began.

"I see~"

"You don't believe me."

"Well that's just not truee."

I was lying of course; I *didn't* believe her. Akizawa-kun honestly wasn't anywhere near as popular as Sakura-chan seemed to think.

"You're underestimating him too much, Reika. Don't you remember how there was some kouhai that liked him before?"

"Kouhai...? Ah, now that you mention it."

She had a point. Back then I thought she was just being blinded by jealousy, but when I asked a well-informed friend of Ririna's it turns out that there really *was* a kouhai in the track club that had a crush on him. I'm pretty sure that girl gave up on him in the end though, so it all turned out okay.

"So who is it this time?"

"Didn't I tell you during the summer? The 1st Year manager of the track club."

According to Sakura-chan, that manager girl had sent Akizawa-kun quite a few emails.

“Wasn’t she just sending him updates on the club?”

“She wasn’t. Does ‘*Senpai, how about we go out with everyone sometime?*’ sound that way to you?”

“Eh-, you’ve gone through his emails?”

“As if I would just secretly go through his phone. While Takumi was looking at his emails I pretended to cosy up and flirt with him and used that chance to look.”

“You’re amazing...”

“Anyway, it’s just too suspicious, right? I only saw a few of her emails but I bet the rest were like that too. And during the Athletics Carnival she gave him a towel and there were other incidents too...”

“That was just cheering on the Track Club as the manager, right?”

I remember her telling me at the time about how she gave him a towel as well to even the odds.

“And hasn’t Akizawa-kun been using the towel you gave him? There’s nothing to worry about then.”

“You just can’t understand the anxiety of somebody whose crush goes to a different school, Reika. I’m more than just a childhood friend but I still haven’t become his girlfriend yet. As if that wasn’t bad enough I have to go to a different school too, which is why I’ve been *asking* you to keep a lookout for me but what have you been doing instead.”

“Sorry...”

I suppose I should have at least given a cursory check of it. Uuu, Sakura-chan was making a scary face... She was calling me useless with her eyes...

“I uh, think I’ll go look at the chocolates on display,” I said to escape from her reproachful gaze. Hopefully the chocolate parfait would work its calming wonders on her while I was gone.

The display was filled with delicious chocolates being showcased. I considered bringing some of these back with me. Oh, and then I could give some to Yukino-kun. A token of thanks for the little prince that protected me from a scoundrel. Yukino-kun was so cute back then.

“Reika-san...?”

“Eh-”

I turned around to find none other than Maihama-san.

“Gokigen’yoh, Maihama-san. What a coincidence.”

“Yes, it really is. Are you here on your own, Reika-san?”

“No, I am accompanying a friend today.”

“Hmmm~”

Maihama-san gave me a once-over.

“You had better not be following Masaya-sama about again. You’re being an eyesore, you know?”

That was my line. Who else but her was following Kaburagi about.

“Ah, but it isn’t just Masaya-sama, is it. At the firefly-watching party you were making eyes at Shuusuke-sama from the Enjou family too, weren’t you! Don’t you have any principles?”

Hey! There are people watching so stop saying weird things! Wai-, was it intentional!?

“I would appreciate it if you refrained from making scandalous accusations,” I replied, “You are free to love Kaburagi-sama as you wish but could you perhaps keep me out of it? To be frank, you are irritating me.”

“Hmph. Like you can talk. Don’t think I can’t see what you’re planning!”

Stop shouting, damnit! When my mouth pouted unconsciously, Maihama-san sneered.

“Are you trying to store food in those cheek pouches of yours? You look disgraceful. How about going on another diet?”

Cheek pouches!? This bitch! Was she trying to say I had fat cheeks!?

I was done with this. Fine! If she wanted a fight then she had one! I was going to end her!

That was when I noticed that Sakura-chan had appeared at my side.

“What are you doing, Reika.”

“Sakura-chan.”

“Fukioka-!”

For some reason Maihama-san had let out a small moan and taken a step backwards.

“What’s wrong, Sakura-chan?”

“You were taking your sweet time so I came to check up on you. Well? What are you doing?”

Sakura-chan looked between Maihama-san and I.

“Why are you here, Fukioka...”

“For the chocolate? What *else* do you come to a chocolatier for? Not much going on between the ears, huh,” she replied casually.

“Wha-!?”

In contrast, Maihama-san was flustered. Where had all that bluster gone?

“Why are you and Fukioka...”

“Reika is my best friend. Is there a problem, Maihama?”

“Eh!?”

I could clearly see the shock on her face as she looked back and forth between my blank look and Sakura-chan's expressionless mask.

"You're... best friends with Fukioka...!?"

"She is."

After looking here and there, Maihama began to leave in a panic.

"I... see... Then I shall take my leave and leave you two to it. Gokigen'yoh."

...Sakura-chan, what on earth are you?

Maihama-san was like a rich bully who got rid of anybody she didn't like at school. But the moment she saw Sakura-chan she ran away scared... Could it be that Sakura-chan was actually Yurinomiya's Last Boss!?

Also, there was something I just reaaally couldn't get out of my head...

"Now then, shall we head back to our seats?"

I followed after her.

"Sakura-chan..."

"What?"

"I'm your best friend!?"

I couldn't help it any more and latched onto her arm!

"So you thought of me as your best friend! I'm so happy, Sakura-chaaan!"

"Hey-! You're creeping me out! Get off, you're crowding me!"

"Sakura-chaaaaaan!"

Despite how slender they looked, Sakura-chan's arms tore me off by force. It hurts, Sakura-chan! Your grip strength is too crazy!

“You’re so mean, Sakura-chan. We’re supposed to be best friends…”

"Who are you calling your best friend, you shameless thing!"

Sakura-chan ignored me and went back to our seats on her own. Sakura-chan was actually a tsundere!

Geez, she was being so mean. But since we were best friends I guess I'd forgive her!

“Uhehe.”

“...Stop laughing like a creep. Are you really an ojousama?”

"You're such a tsundere, Sakura-chan."

“Don’t get carried away!”

Geeez~ She's was so shyyy~ We're best friends here, so you should just be more honest!

“Sakura-chwan, the tsundere~♥” I said as I poked her cheek with my finger.

That finger was immediately caught in a vice grip and bent in a way it wasn't meant to.

It hurts it hurts it hurts! I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sooooooorryyyy!

"I got ahead of myself! Please forgive me!"

“Remember this.”

“...Yes.”

That joint lock felt a little serious just now, Sakura-chan...

"Anyway, why did Maihama-san look so scared of you, Sakura-chan?"

“Probably because when she tried to target me a while back, I turned the tables on her.”

“Turned the tables? Eh-, don’t tell me you used violence!?”

“As if. I just let her know that I knew her biggest secret, and that if she angered me I would seriously ruin her life.”

“Ehhh~ Using somebody’s weakness to blackmail them like that isn’t good, Sakura-chan. No wonder somebody like Maihama-san was so scared.”

“As long as she doesn’t do anything to me I’m hardly going to harm her.”

You’re so scary, Sakura-chan. Were the students at Yurinomiya actually all afraid of her? I hoped she had friends. Oh! But since she had me for a best friend I guess everything was okay!

“So what was it, anyway?”

“That’s a secret. Still, if that girl ever causes you any trouble, just smile at her knowingly. Her paranoia will do the rest.”

“Uwahn... So how did you find out that secret anyway?”

“Just watch what they say and do, and pay attention to which topics they act suspiciously around. Once you have a clue, just find the proof.”

“Uwahn... Then does that mean you know what secrets I’m trying to keep?”

Sakura-chan’s gaze moved downwards from my face. Amazing... So she knew that the parfait and chocolates weren’t enough for me!

“It’s that tummy that hasn’t disappeared with all that running, right?”

“...”

Oh my god. What clairvoyance was this!? Once again I reaffirmed the belief that I could never cross Sakura-chan, which was why I promised to look into that manager girl for her.

Sakura-chan gave a terrifying smile.

“I’ll have to go to your School Festival to make sure everybody knows their place.”

Scary...

It seemed that the already busy School Festival was going to get a little busier for me. Maybe I could get Ririna's friend to check for me.

Aah, Bea-tan's face just wouldn't look right!

Kaburagi's class was apparently doing a haunted house. At the rate this doll was going, it would be better displayed *there* instead!

'Kisshouin-san, you don't mind us all coming to your School Festival, right? I'm looking forward to seeing my Beatrice.'

Gyaaaaaaaaah!

There were only a few days left. I picked up my Cerberus and ran crying to Oniisama's room for help.

Chapter 157

Below this is some general knowledge that actually comes up quite a bit, so you should probably have a read as well:

Wu Zetian

Wu Zetian was a Chinese sovereign who ruled unofficially as empress consort and empress dowager and later, officially as empress regnant during the brief Zhou dynasty (684-705), which interrupted the Tang dynasty (618–690 & 705–907).

Wu was the sole officially recognised empress regnant of China in more than two millennia.

The importance to history of Wu Zetian's period of political and military leadership includes the major expansion of the Chinese empire, extending it far beyond its previous territorial limits, deep into Central Asia, and engaging in a series of wars on the Korean Peninsula, first allying with Silla against Goguryeo, and then against Silla over the occupation of former Goguryeo territory.

Wu Zetian was born into a rich family. She had servants at her disposal to perform routine tasks for her, so there were not many domestic jobs that Wu would ever have to learn. Because of this, Wu was encouraged by her father to read books and pursue her education. He made sure that his daughter was well-educated, a trait that was not common among women, much less encouraged by their fathers.

At age fourteen, she was taken to be an imperial concubine (lesser wife) of Emperor Taizong of Tang. It was there that she became a type of secretary. This opportunity allowed her to continue to pursue her education. She was given the title of cairen, title for one of the consorts with the fifth rank in Tang's nine-rank system for imperial officials, nobles, and consorts.

When she was summoned to the palace, her mother, the Lady Yang, wept bitterly when saying farewell to her, but she responded,

“How do you know that it is not my fortune to meet the Son of Heaven?”

Lady Yang reportedly then understood her ambitions, and therefore stopped crying.

The traditional Chinese historical view on Wu Zetian generally was mixed — admiring her for her abilities in governing the state, but vilifying her for her actions in seizing imperial power.

“Wu Zetian (690–705) was an extraordinary woman, attractive, exceptionally gifted, politically astute and an excellent judge of men. With single minded determination, she overcame the opposition of the Confucian establishment through her own efforts, unique among palace women by not using her own family. Her rise to power was steeped in blood....” Ann Paludan

Xu Fu

Xu Fu was born in 255 BC in Qi, an ancient Chinese state, and served as a court sorcerer in Qin Dynasty China. He was sent by Qin Shi Huang to the eastern seas twice to look for the elixir of life. His two journeys occurred between 219 BC and 210 BC.

It was believed that the fleet included 60 barques and around 5,000 crew members, 3,000 boys and girls, and craftsmen of different fields. After he embarked on a second mission in 210 BC, he never returned.

Those who support the theory that Xu Fu landed in Japan credit him with being the catalyst for the development of ancient Japanese society. The Jōmon culture which had existed in ancient Japan for over 6,000 years suddenly disappeared around 300 BC.

The farming techniques and knowledge that Xu brought along are said to have improved the quality of life of the ancient Japanese people and he is said to have introduced many new plants and techniques to ancient Japan.

The worship of Xu Fu as the “God of farming”, “God of medicine” and “God of silk” by the Japanese is attributed to these achievements. Numerous temples and memorials of Xu can be found in many places in Japan.

Yang Guifei

Yang Yuhuan, of the highest consort rank Guifei, was known as one of the Four Beauties of ancient China. She was the beloved consort of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang during his later years.

In 733, fourteen-year-old Yang Yuhuan married Li Mao, the Prince of Shou and the son of Emperor Xuanzong and Consort Wu.

After Consort Wu died in 737, Emperor Xuanzong was greatly saddened by the death of his then-favorite concubine.

Some time after that, however, Princess Yang somehow came into Xuanzong's favor and the Emperor decided to take her as his consort. However, since Princess Yang was already the wife of his son, Emperor Xuanzong stealthily arranged her to become a Taoist nun, with the tonsured name Taizhen, in order to prevent criticism that would affect his plan of making her his concubine.

Yang then stayed, for a brief moment, as a Taoist nun in the palace itself, before Emperor Xuanzong made her an imperial consort after bestowing a new wife on his son Li Mao. Yang became the favorite consort of the Emperor.

During the An Lushan Rebellion, as Emperor Xuanzong and his cortege were fleeing from the capital Chang'an to Chengdu, the emperor's guards demanded that he put Yang to death because they blamed the rebellion on her cousin Yang Guozhong and the rest of her family. The emperor capitulated and reluctantly ordered his attendant Gao Lishi to strangle Yang to death.

Yang was known for having a full and fleshy figure, which was a much sought-after quality at the time.

Thanks to Oniisama's miracle hands, the Bea-tan doll was somehow finished before the School Festival. That was horrible...

Trying to create long hair for her was already harder than expected, but trying to create the same perfect curls just made it worse.

Originally I was going to use wool that was curled to begin with but it turned out to be a little off compared to the real Bea-tan.

As it turns out the reason was that it was all one colour. I ended up buying curled brown wool in every shade I could find, and after a lot of trial and error I managed to mix together a shade that looked right. You did it, Reika...

Thanks to that adventure my room was filled with brown wool right now. Maybe I could make some animals with it after the School Festival was over. Probably not soon though. I wasn't sure I wanted to jump right back into needle felting again...

The wedding dress that was the crystallisation of our club's effort and passion stood in the centre of our exhibition room, while our personal projects lined the walls. It was amazing what my club members have come up with on their own.

Of particular note was Minami-kun. Despite all the time he spent doing the silver embroidery on the club wedding dress, he still managed to submit an amazing tapestry of the madonna and child.

In comparison the Club President had hardly contributed to the wedding dress at all... At best I helped out with some of the bouquets. Sorry for being useless.

Still, my life-sized Beatrice doll was cute and had a nice realism to it, so I don't think I shamed my club. Oniisama, Sasajima-san, everybody who helped me at the club, thank you.

Unlike some other attractions, the Handicraft Club's exhibition was free to enter and leave. Thanks to that we didn't need much manpower outside of a small rotating staff of guides.

Since they didn't really need me here, I was going to use my effort on my class' attraction instead.

Chinese Tea Café, Xu Fu.

The setting of our café was that we were the disciples of the Court Magician Xu Fu, who came to Japan with him in the Qin dynasty. That's why we were advertising our teas as elixirs of immortality. It felt like a bit of a scam.

We had quite a few types of with us; normal stuff like oolong, jasmine or pu er, as well as some more exotic types like flower teas and flowering teas. The flowering tea had been quite popular with the girls in my class so we were hoping it would be popular with the customers too.

For snacks to go with it we were selling annin tofu, mango pudding, black sesame pudding, and various types of moon cakes among other things.



Annin tofu (杏仁豆腐) or almond tofu is a soft, jellied dessert made of almond milk, agar, and sugar, allegedly eaten in China as far back as 2000 years ago.

We bought them all, obviously, so the taste was guaranteed. I had made sure to taste test each one myself. They were yummy.

The shop itself was decorated with a chinoiserie theme, served by boys in changpao, and girls in pants and cheongsam. Originally the girls wanted to wear hanfu like celestial maidens but we decided against it because it wasn't very disciple-ish.

Anyhow, with this, the theme would have been perfect if not for Dite.

Given how he jumped at any opportunity to play his violin, it came as no surprise that he was pushing for a part in the School Festival too.

Everyone told him that the violin wouldn't fit the theme, and that if he really wanted to play something then he should get an erhu instead, but Dite wouldn't budge.

In the end he was so annoying that we just relented. The excuse was that he was some foreign guest from the West, and hence the sight of his afro bobbing away as he played away in a trance.

"Welcome, customer. These are elixirs of immortality from the famed Mount Penglai. With but one sip your youth will be returned to you..."

I was busy serving customers myself.

Some people came for the variety of teas, while others came to visit friends in our class, so the sales weren't doing too badly. Still, they weren't looking amazing either.

I mean, I had nothing personal against a nice relaxed pace like this, but I had the niggling feeling that I was supposed to be doing more as the vice class representative.

Maybe by standing outside and attracting more customers.

I stepped into the hallway for a moment and looked at who was passing by. Oh! Wasn't that the president of the Soccer Club? I waved my hand to beckon him over.

When he noticed me he cried, "Hii, Wu Zetian...!" before running away.

...

But I'm *not* Wu Zetian. I've always thought of myself as Yang Guifei in my heart.

The attraction by Kaburagi's class was the one most looked-forward to in our grade; they were doing one of those sound-based haunted houses. Pretty much all the guests had come here.

Considering the size limitations of the classroom they were using, the audio haunted house with 3-dimensional was probably as good as it could get. And given how picky Kaburagi was about these things in general, thanks to the audio equipment the haunted house was so good you'd never expect it to be something from a school festival.

The programme was Hoichi the Earless. Before you entered the haunted house, a guide in white clothing put a heart sutra seal over your face. After that they led you into this room with will o wisps and wooden grave markers.



After taking a seat, you put on the headphones provided. That was when hell began.

The gloomy sound of a biwa played. Along with it was an eerie singing voice.

Since it was 3-dimensional, it supposedly felt like the spirits of the Heike were chanting right by your ear and chills ran down your spine. It was like they were standing right behind you.

When the spirits came to claim you after you had the heart sutra written all over you, apparently some of the more timid customers took off their headphones to escape back to reality. The only heart sutra actually on them was the one plastered on their face after all.

As the climax when your ears were torn off, apparently some of the guests actually ran screaming down the hallway.

Given that I was a coward myself I definitely didn't want to go, but Class Rep's quartet had apparently promised to go with each other. What the heck. Was that like a double date? So envious. But since everybody was seated in their own little area, I doubted they could do that haunted house thing when you screamed and clung to each other.

A while ago when Ririna visited Xu Fu with her friends, she told me that they were going to the haunted house as well later. Minami-kun was the odd one out, with an aura of 'I don't want to go...' coming out of his entire body. I wonder if he'd be okay...

Anyway, Ririna had ordered the flowering tea and seemed to be really taken with how it bloomed like a flower underwater, so I made a note to give the rest to her that I had at home.

When it was time for shifts to change, my friends and I went walking around the school as well. Since it was turning out to be impossible to properly see everything today, I'd do the rest tomorrow.

Enjou and Wakaba-chan's class was doing a café too. Cafés were easy to do, after all. Unlike our class' Chinese tea café, they were going with a completely normal one. Given that it was a rare and limited chance to see Enjou in a barista outfit it was popular enough already. On top of that, they implemented a numbered ticketing system for people who wanted to enjoy his latte art. Everyone was talking about how there had been a huge queue of girls outside since the morning.

“Come *onn*, Reika-sama. Let’s go see Enjou-sama’s café!” Ru’ne-chan said.

“I have no objections, but without a ticket he will not make us latte art, you know?”

“I’m disappointed about that too, but we should still go. I want to at least see him in the barista outfit.”

Ru’ne-chan had missed out on her chance to get a ticket. I guess she had underestimated how popular he would be.

We entered the busy shop only to find that Kaburagi was there too. The girls were overjoyed. There he was, sipping away at his coffee with home-made biscuits. Which was surprising enough, since Kaburagi never ate home-made food.

Nobody had expected him to actually eat any of them but contrary to expectations he took a bite.

“Bring me the one who made these,” he said with slightly widened eyes.

Confused about why she was being called out, Wakaba-chan stepped out from the back of the store.

“Um, was there something wrong...?”

“Takamichi. *You* were the one who made these?”

“Eh, yes. I did, but...?”

While Wakaba-chan was looking confused and uncomfortable, Kaburagi suddenly chuckled.

“They were delicious.”

Kaburagi, who never ate home made food, had eaten a home-made biscuit. A home-made biscuit baked by a girl, that he even praised as being delicious.

The news spread through Suiran like wildfire, and there was a rush of female customers to ‘The Golden Dawn’, the fortune telling shop that Fuyuko-sama’s class was doing.

Did this mean that Kaburagi was starting to fall for her...?

“Here, Kisshouin-san. This one is on me,” Enjou smiled, as he left a latte art of a rabbit in front of me.

Chapter 158

Kaburagi had never eaten handmade sweets.

Even as far back as primary school, he never once touched the food the girls made in class, or the valentines chocolates that they made him.

That same Kaburagi had eaten the handmade biscuits that some School Festival café had made. Not only that but he had gone out of his way to praise the baker, and even gave a rare smile to a *girl*.

The shock that this gave Suiran was worse than even the time when they had come to school together.

Before this, the only exception that Kaburagi had made to date was food that Yurie-sama had made.

A flood of girls had wondered if perhaps the Emperor had changed his position, and frantically brought him food, but as usual he shot them down.

“I don’t eat handmade food.”

“Then what was eating that biscuit about!?” was the natural reaction, intensifying the rumours.

Since nobody could actually *ask* Kaburagi, some of the girls even started relying on fortune tellers.

Thanks to that, Wakaba-chan was under unnecessary scrutiny once again, making enemies of a bunch of girls once again. Nobody was saying it aloud, but you could tell that they were wondering if Kaburagi had... feelings, for her. I wondered that too, but unlike me, the Kaburagi Fans were pressured by it.

Apparently some girls went to the café just to see what those biscuits were all about and left after leaving a slew of insults.

“This isn’t anything special.”

“Don’t get cocky just because he praised these measly biscuits.”

Stuff like that.

I personally thought they were pretty good myself, though...

But well, it’s not like they came there to actually taste them or anything, I suppose.

Anyway, besides the biscuit incident, there was one other little topic people were discussing. It was about how Enjou treated me to a latte art.

“I heard that even though she didn’t have a ticket, Enjou-sama especially made a latte art for Reika-sama!”

“Gosh! So Enjou-sama really does like...!?”

I could hear comments about it here and there.

What a nuisance.

“Something just for Reika-sama! I’m so envious!”

“And it was such a cute rabbit too.”

Even the girls who came with me were causing a fuss.

“It was surely just some whim of Enjou-sama’s,” I insisted.

“That’s not true. This is Enjou-sama’s way of being a gentleman, Reika-sama.”

Gentleman!? This guy was just trying to use me to draw attention away from what Kaburagi did.

And he chose the rabbit because no doubt he heard about Kaburagi’s crackpot Chinese Zodiac theory and picked it to make fun of me.

That was just the kind of guy Enjou was. You could totally tell from the smile.

And even though he was just some amateur, why was it done so well. I was so frustrated that I ignored everyone’s pleas and messed it up with my spoon.

Completing the Chinese Zodiac? How could I possibly have such a dopey ambition!

Honestly... This School Festival was supposed to be fun, but thanks to those two the first day had turned into a fiasco.

On the second day, the School Festival was open to anybody with a ticket.

Umewaka-kun and co. had wanted to come to last year's too, but I politely turned them down. After all, I was wearing sheep ears, and I didn't exactly want him to (good intentions or not) spread word of how I looked just like his beloved dog.

This year though, he helped me out with the Bea-tan doll, and he seemed to be really looking forward to it, so I decided to hand them all tickets. And I very, very carefully warned him not to talk about my similarities to Bea-tan.

Besides their entrance tickets, I had given them a bunch of coupons as well, since none of the attractions were taking real money. It was a system where we instead purchased coupons to use in advance. As a form of contribution to the school, each year the Pivoine would buy these coupons in bulk and then distribute them to its members. I pretty much never spent all of mine.

Since Umewaka-kun and the others were coming this year, I ended up dividing the coupons between the five of them.

Although they were overjoyed to be getting them they were worried that I wasn't getting enough. That was no issue, of course. After all, besides the bunch that the Pivoine bought on their own, the parents of its members bought a bunch of coupons as their own contribution to the school. If coupons were money, I was as good as a millionaire. If you five don't have enough, you can always come asking for more, you know? Since you're coming, you may as well enjoy everything you can.

Since it was open to people outside of just our high school section, Day 2 of the School Festival was crowded beyond measure. Even the Xu Fu café was so badly crowded that the orders never seemed to end. Things were really flourishing, weren't they.

Anyhow, Mao-chan came to visit too, with Ichinokura-san and Yuuri-kun in tow.

"Reika-oneesama!"

"Welcome, Mao-chan. Yuuri-kun. Ichinokura-san."

Mao-chan was all dressed up, and I noticed that she was wearing the sparkling glass hair ornament that Imari-sama bought her over the summer. Going on a date with her boyfriend while wearing a present from another man! Mao-chan was such a sinful woman!

“Reika-oneesama, you look so cute in that outfit. Doesn’t she, Yuuri? Haruto-ojisama?”

“Mhm.”

“She really does, Mao. You look great in it, Reika-san.”

“Goodness, thank you all very much.”

Mao-chan, you’re still calling him Ojisama, aren’t you. Did she think of him that way now?

Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun were happily sharing an annin tofu and black sesame pudding between them. How enviable.

“Thanks to you bringing me to Taiwan, I was able to contribute a little to my class’ café this time. Thank you very much, Ichinokura-san.”

“Ah, Taiwan? That brings back memories. Those xiaolongbao were really good, weren’t they. It’s been lonely recently without you two to go eat with.”

“Because you have *Erika-san*, Haruto-ojisama.”

Mao-chan turned away with a huff. Ichinokura-san smiled, not quite sure what to do.

“Now, now, Mao-chan,” I said, “Is it not about time that you let him off the ojisama punishment? Ichinokura-san seems a little devastated each time you call him that, you know?”

“But...” pouted Mao-chan.

I couldn’t help but smile at how cute she was.

“Ma~o~chan.”

“...”

“You actually love your ‘Haruto-niisama’, no?”

“...Fine. I’ll forgive him. Just this once, since Reika-oneesama asked, Haruto-niisama!”

How are you so cute, Mao-chan! Yuuri-kun rubbed her head with praise, while Ichinokura-san seemed awfully moved that his beloved niece was calling him ‘niisama’ again.

“Thank you, Reika-san. I’m really glad I came today.”

“I see. Oh, Mao-chan. How about you come over to my house again? Oniisama said that he wanted to meet you again too.”

“Waah! I want to see Takateru-niisama too! Haruto-niisama, remember how I told you? Takateru-niisama is super dreamy, you know!”

“Ohh, I see...”

Ichinokura-san’s smile turned a little stiff. Ukeke. Ah! Yuuri-kun was frowning again. Oh no. Sorry, Yuuri-kun.

When the three of them were done, Mao-chan told me that they were off to Ririna’s class next. Given that it was Ririna, I could already see her telling everyone about how Mao-chan was like her little sister.

The next to come and visit me was Sakura-chan and Akizawa-kun.

Sakura-chan had told me that she was going to spend the most time around the 1st year attractions, to let everybody know that she existed, as well as scout out her rivals. Despite her deranged intentions, outside she was still the perfect traditional beauty, neat and proper.

“Reika-san, gokigen’yoh.”

“Welcome, Sakura-chan, Akizawa-kun.”

The people who were familiar with him were completely curious about this girl from another school that he brought along. Despite noticing their stares, Sakura-chan

pretended that she didn't and said cutely,

"I wonder what I should pick, Taku."

I expected no less from her.

"What would you suggest, Reika-san?" she asked.

"Let me see. Since this is a rare occasion, how about something more exotic, like our flowering teas?"

"Flowering teas?"

"Yes, it is a specially arranged tea that blooms like a flower when-"

"Sakurako-saan!" somebody suddenly interrupted.

It was none other than the travelling musician from the West, Dite.

"Sakurako-san! Who would have thought that I would meet you here! Could it be that you came to listen to my violin!?" he asked, afro swaying as he closed in on her.

Since she was sitting on a chair, the only place she could escape to was Akizawa-kun.

"Eh-, Sakura-chan, you know Dite?" I asked.

"...We've met a few times at violin recitals," she whispered, sounding rather chagrined.

Come to think of it, Sakura-chan had been learning violin since she was little, hadn't she. Who would have thought that she'd know him thanks to that. And from the way Dite was behaving...

Even when the tea arrived, Dite doggedly kept trying to talk to her. Even when I told him that the musician had to go back and perform, he wouldn't listen. Mmmm... I mean, pretty much anyone would come to the same conclusion as me, right...?

And even though Akizawa-kun was calmly drinking tea at the start, as time went by his mood worsened. Oh? Akizawa-kun was a gentle person, so it was really rare seeing a frown coming from him, you know? And Sakura-chan seemed to notice too.

“Sakura, it’s about time to go, don’t you think?”

“Taku?”

He drained the rest of his tea in one gulp and then brusquely left his chair with Sakura-chan in hand.

“Ah! But Sakurako-san and I were still-”

“Kisshouin-san, thank you for the tea. Let’s go, Sakurako.”

“Y-, Yes. Well then, see you, Reika-san.”

And with that, Sakura-chan was dragged out of the store. Oh ho ho? Don’t tell me he was jealous?

And as Sakura-chan left, I glimpsed a wicked smirk on her face.

“Kisshouin-san! Just what kind of relationship do Sakurako-san and that Akizawa-kun have!?”

This time it was me that Dite pestered. I suppose as of right now, more than childhood friends, but less than a couple? But then thanks to Dite, maybe that was going to change.

Wow, you were a complete stalking horse today, weren’t you, Dite. Could it be that Dite was going to join my Forever Alone village?

Please no. If one of our villagers played violin from morning to night, every day...

Dite returned to his stage and put his feelings into his violin.

Chapter 159

My phone buzzed.

'We're here~' read the message from Umewaka-kun.

Umewaka-kun was really eager to see the Bea-tan doll but the others, Moriyama-san in particular, wanted to go around and check out the attractions and food first. That's why we agreed that we could meet up during my shift at the Handicrafts Club.

I hoped my Bea-tan doll was good enough for Dog Lover-kun. Oniisama fixed up the face quite nicely, so it looked a lot like the real thing I'd like to think. Still, considering that it was Dog Lover-kun I could imagine him roaring,

"This is no Bea-tan of mine!"

and storming off...

What if that really happened...

If that wasn't enough, my phone received an email from Sakura-chan too.

'I was able to give the Track Club Manager a warning without issue.'

What did you do, Sakura-chan...

During my shift break I listened to the blushing Class Rep report on how the four of them had explored the School Festival yesterday. It seemed like quite a good time. Apparently they bought sweets and shared them. That's fine. I had fun too with just my girl friends.

Class Rep said that they had the most fun with the haunted house. It was even scarier than they'd expected.

"Just remembering it..." shuddered Class Rep as he covered his ears.

My shift in the Handicrafts Club was in the afternoon. Not that I really did anything.

My job was basically just to sit on a chair and watch out for anybody touching the exhibits.

Minami-kun was on shift with me. Speaking of which, didn't he and the rest of Ririna's gang go to Kaburagi's haunted house yesterday?

"How was it? The haunted house, I mean."

"It was terrifying. I'm ashamed to say that I took my headphones off midway... And then Kotou-san noticed and yelled at me afterwards for having no guts."

"Goodness. I am sorry you went through that. Let me have a word with her later."

"No! It was my fault for being a wimp..."

Geez! That Ririna!

Anyway, I had to say, we weren't getting an awful lot of guests... I think I was starting to understand what the sports clubs were thinking...

Just as I thought that, Umewaka-kun's crew came along.

"Heyy! Kisshouin-san!"

"Welcome, everyone."

They had quite a few bags on them. Spoils from all across the school, no doubt.

"Thanks for inviting us, Kisshouin-san. The school festivals at Suiran are freaking amazing!" said Kitazawa-kun.

The group was all smiles as they thanked me.

"I am glad to hear you say that. Did any of the attractions stand out?"

"I had clam chowder. In a *bread* bowl. It was really cool that you could eat the bowl too."



“What about that piadini stuff! The crepe-thing with the meats and vegetables inside. That was *amazing*! There were like lines waiting up for it, yanno. That’s why we tried it. Thank god that we did.”



“Ahh, the Soccer Club’s refreshment booth,” I realised.

Damned Soccer Club. Seems like you weren’t just all talk.

“Oh and gosh, those donut bites were great too. And the fruit juice.”

“I liked the phở,” added one of the boys.



“You seemed to do nothing but eat,” I noted.

“No, no, we played some games too. Like darts. And it wasn’t even just some dart board, but a darts *machine*! That’s Suiran for you. It was like we went to a real darts place.”

“And you know? We went to the haunted house too! I have to say, that was the best thing here. It was so freaking scary! I underestimated it because this was just a school festival but hot damn was that scary. It was like my ears really were being torn off!”

“Kitazawa was in tears~”

“Shaddup.”

Yup, yup. I was really glad to see that they were having fun. There was a lot of money put into this, so it made sense that the attractions and food stalls were better than your average school.

“Oh yeah. By the way, when we were entering the school, the ticket person got really flustered about this red flower on the ticket. Does it have some special meaning?” Kitazawa-kun asked.

It meant that the holder of the ticket was somebody that a Pivoine member invited.

“Not particularly.”

“Hmmm... But when they gave us all these complimentary tickets so I thought that it might. Oh, and the girls here call each other ‘-sama’ don’t they? Could it be that they call you ‘Reika-sama’ too!?”

“Well, yes...”

“Reika-sama. It sure fits you~ How about we start calling you Reika-sama from now on?”

Absolutely. Do. Not.

They all seemed to find the idea really funny and laughed away.

“Oh hey!” began one of the girls, “A while back when we were tired we found this café, but when we entered there was this hot barista guy who was like a prince! Who was that? Do you know, Kisshouin-san? I think he should be in your grade. And he was

really popular too, with all these girls around. Are you two close?"

Hot barista guy... Enjou then.

"We know of each other."

"What the heck. What a shame."

Both Moriyama and Sasaki-san looked crestfallen.

"Are there any other hot guys?" they tried instead, which prompted the boys to ask,

"What about cute girls?"

Cute girls? There's one right here, isn't there?

"More importantly! Let's go see Bea-tan already!" Umewaka-kun said impatiently.

The time of judgement had come...

"This way. Follow me."

I anxiously led the group towards my Bea-tan doll.

"Ohhh!"

Umewaka-kun seemed deeply moved.

"How is it?"

"It's perfect... It's perfect, Kisshouin-san!"

"Truly!?"

I did it! I *passed*!

"You've really outdone yourself in capturing Bea-tan's loveliness. You're amazing, Kisshouin-san!"

I see, I see. So this is what it means to have your hard work pay off.

“Hey, Kisshouin-san? Could I touch this?”

I mean, it was technically against the rules to touch the exhibits, but since it was just my one I didn't mind.

“Go ahead. But please take care not to bend it. That can happen with too much force.”

“Thanks!”

Umewaka-kun gently held the Bea-tan doll. And then just *stared*. What the...

The moment I began to wonder...

“Bea-tan!”

Overcome with emotion, he gave the doll a tight hug.

“Bea-tan, Bea-tan! You're so cute, Bea-tan!” he said as he began to nuzzle it against his cheeks.

I was watching a tall high school boy with piercings shower a doll with kisses as he exclaimed ‘Lovely!’ in English over and over... This was *surreal*...

Kitazawa-kun went to stop him while everybody else looked this way and that for onlookers.

I realised that Minami-kun had actually been staring, slackjawed. The few guests we had were quickly leaving the room...

“Aah, sorry about that. I got a little too excited. But Kisshouin-san, how come this Bea-tan doll smells so good? Could it be that this is the smell of your house?”

He brought it close and began sniffing at it. Hu hu hu, so he noticed.

“The truth is that there is rose potpourri inside.”

“Rose potpourri?”

That's right. I decided not to mention it, content to let just the people who noticed it realise. This was how you did casual classiness! It was by keeping little additions like

this casual that you could show how good your taste was! Ohohohoho!

“Wow, I see. But she really is cute. She looks just like Bea-tan. ...I want her. Hey, Kisshouin-san, couldn't you give her to me?”

“Eh?”

“Come on, please! I'll take care of her, I swear! She'll be like Bea-tan's adopted little sister. Come on, Kisshouin-san!”

“Ummm...”

“Come on, please!”

The intensity of his eyes was kind of scary... Everybody else was creeped out too. Moriyama-san, didn't you have a crush on him?

“Kisshouin!”

I turned to find Fellow Stalking Horse, standing by the doorway.

“I'd like a word.”

With a stern expression, Fellow Stalking Horse called me out into the hallway.

Eh? What had I done *this* time?

Chapter 160

Ririna KGB Agent: Saika Tsugumi

My friend Ririna-chan has an older cousin named Kisshouin Reika. She loves her very much.

I entered Suiran through its primary section. My family was decently well off, but not so wealthy that I could enter the Pivoine either. And I didn't think of myself as the type who liked attention, so there was no reason for anybody to pay attention to me.

The next six years were enjoyable enough though. I spent them with girls who were more like me, and never drew the notice of the showier girls.

When I entered the middle school section I ended up in the same class as Kotou Ririna-chan.

Despite being a new External herself, Ririna-chan was never afraid of anything, and even the Internal Students were given no face. That was just the kind of girl she was.

To be honest I thought she was a little scary at first. She was bold and wilful, and nothing like me at all, so naturally we would never have anything to do with each other. That was my impression at the time.

At Suiran there was an upperclassman in the year above. His name was Kaburagi Masaya-senpai but we also called him the Emperor, and everybody adored and admired him.

The Emperor was constantly surrounded by his female fans, and his fan club even had its own hierarchy. New fans had to give way to the older fans, and it was an unwritten rule that underclassmen could only gaze at him from behind their senpai.

Despite this, Kotou-san took no notice and of all things began to follow the Emperor around and talk to him.

Naturally the many onesama in the higher grades and the girls in our own year were both scandalised and outraged. But no matter how many times they summoned her

and berated her, the result was always the same.

“Who I like is my own business! Who gave you the right to complain about it!”

Kotou-san would become enraged at them instead.

Because of her attitude her enemies increased, and near the end everybody was sure that she would be consigned to isolation. But the most famous girl in 2nd Year, Kisshouin Reika-sama, began to apologise to each one of Kotou-san’s detractors.

As it turned out, Reika-sama and Kotou-san were cousins. With Reika-sama bowing in apology, even the Pivoine girls from 1st Year, who hated Kotou-san the most, were forced into inaction.

But now nobody could touch her. It was unfortunately a matter of course that Kotou-san’s behaviour grew more outrageous. With Reika-sama as her backer, Kotou-san was able to avoid any retribution.

One day Kotou-san suddenly stopped following the Emperor around. Perhaps because of the rumours I heard about her enraging him. But if that was true then the consequences should have been dire. Kotou-san was coming to school as normal.

Something else to note was that her behaviour was more restrained than before, and she was less careless in what she did. Rumours ran abound in our grade, but without a confirmation from Kotou-san herself, in the end nobody knew what had happened.

She hadn’t lost any of her strong will, but from that day onwards she stopped crossing the line. As a result she gradually gained friends.

Of course, I still had no intention of getting involved with her, but because Kotou had the ‘East’ character while Saika had ‘West’, the teacher grouped us together at every chance.

Before I knew it, Kotou-san would hold my arm and walk with me whenever it came time to switch classrooms.

And Kotou-san began calling me ‘Tsugumi’, even though I had no recollection of allowing it.

“Huh. This is the same model that I’m using. I think I’ll exchange addresses with you.”

Somehow she even spotted my cellphone and forced her email address on me.

Each day after that came a flurry of messages.

I guess she thought well of me for whatever reason. I noticed this when she followed the Emperor too, but Kotou-san was really pushy...

By now I had pretty much given up. I didn't think it was possible for me to escape this person any more...

Still, although she was overbearing and somewhat wilful, Kotou-san was by no means a bad person. As long as she acknowledged you she wouldn't hesitate to defend you with all her might.

One day, some boy called me "midget four-eyes". Kotou-san rushed out and began shouting at him.

"Make fun of my friend again and I'll damage your hair so badly the roots will never grow anything again!"

As the frightened boy tried to escape she chased after him and continued to threaten him.

"How about a widow's peak! Or a tonsure! Maybe I'll just take it all!"

Kotou-san was incredible...

But just now, she said 'my friend'...

I decided to give calling her name a try.

"Thank you, Ririna-chan."

For a moment Kotou-san, now Ririna-chan, looked surprised, but that quickly changed into a satisfied smile.

From that day onwards, we really were friends.

Ririna-chan's conversations often involved Reika-senpai.

I was a plain and easily overlooked girl, but because of my friendship with Ririna-chan I was allowed to call her 'Reika-senpai'. It was wonderful.

Anyhow, Kisshouin Reika-senpai was the perfect onesama to us. Not only was she beautiful, but she was charismatic and intelligent too. Ririna-chan didn't seem to think so though.

"Geez, Reika-san has gotten fat again."

"Apparently Reika-san was dropkicked by a monkey at Nikkou, but she couldn't even counterattack."

"Reika-san said that her dream was to be proposed to with too many flower bouquets to carry. And the other day she said that she wanted to exchange her vows on Christmas, in a church decorated by little lights, you know? Reika-san might really be tricked by a marriage swindler one day..."

"Reika-san keeps buying worthless mail order stuff that she sees on television. The other day when I went to sleep over she proudly brought out this 'kaimaki futon' sleeping bag thing and told me to sleep in it."

"You know, Reika-san's whole family came down with food poisoning because of her home-made yoghurt."

"When I asked Reika-san what her ideal type was, she told me that it was somebody who would chant the Spell of Destruction with her. Laputa? Geez, Reika-san really never grows up."

I had no idea if these were truth or lies, but each time Ririna-chan would let out a huge sigh and say,

"It's tough having an older sister that you always need to take care of."

I think as an only child, Ririna-chan actually really wanted siblings.

Being the stubborn person that she was, Ririna-chan would never admit it, but she actually really loved Reika-senpai.

During Reika-senpai's middle school graduation, Ririna-chan said, "Reika-san won't get flowers from anyone else, anyway!" as an excuse to bring her flowers.

But even though Ririna-chan tried her hardest to choose, for some reason she had Reika-senpai's oniisama hand them over.

I think she was upset because of all the flowers that other kouhai gave Reika-senpai.

During our own ceremony the next year, Reika-senpai and her oniisama came to offer their congratulations as well. They gave Ririna-chan a bouquet of lollipop lilies that was just perfect for her.

Although her tongue was venomous as always, after Reika-senpai and her brother left, Ririna-chan hugged the bouquet and secretly cried just a little.

These days there are lollipop lilies and urara roses growing in the garden at Ririna-chan's house.

The rumours about Reika-senpai's love life seemed to be endless.

I suppose that was little surprise, though. Reika-senpai was like a beautiful queen, always surrounded by other people.

First was the pairing that was considered not only the most enviable, but also the most dreamy; none other than the Emperor himself.

The Emperor was a person who rarely paid girls any attention, and Reika-senpai was one of the very few girls he was close to. For example, when he gave Reika-senpai a love poem anthology, or when he played a song on the piano for her. It was sooo dreamy!

According to rumours, somebody had spotted them behind the school building, the Emperor with a hand on her shoulder, looking like they were about to kiss at any moment. If that was true then this was a huge scoop.

The next love interest was Enjou-sama, the other major source of adoration for Suiran girls. He was the Emperor's best friend, and treated as something like the Prince of Suiran.

There were rumours about how Enjou-sama loved Reika-senpai as well, for example stories about how the two of them shared an umbrella home, or how he brought back souvenirs for Reika-senpai.

According to the girls in the Pivoine, the two of them often happily chatted in the salon or at parties, and although this next bit was also just a rumour, apparently Reika-senpai had wanted a firefly, so Enjou-sama caught one and gifted it to her as a present.

The most important piece of evidence was the time with the matching towels! Reika-senpai said that it was a present from his younger brother, but nobody believed her. Apparently when people asked Enjou about the match, he replied,

“I’m quite fond of these towels, you see.”

There was also news about how Enjou-sama had especially given Reika-senpai a cappuccino with latte art. Did this mean that Enjou-sama was one point in the lead?

There was another rumour about how Reika-sama had received from one of them, or both, a cute necklace as a present, which the girls were all squealing about. But according to my investigations, this one was a little wrong.

Still, to the girls, the three of them almost lived in another world, so the girls liked to imagine fantastical stories of romance between them.

It wasn’t just the Emperor and Enjou-sama though. In Reika-senpai’s own grade was a diligent-looking senpai who was the Class Representative, as well as the brawny senpai from the Judo Club, both of whom were often spotted acting quite intimately with Reika-senpai. There were accounts of them sometimes speaking happily to Reika-senpai with a red face, so they definitely liked her, or so the rumours went.

Besides that were plenty of rumours about other men too.

For example, how in truth her oniisama’s friend was carefully grooming her to be his future wife, just like Hikaru Genji.

Or how, no, that was completely wrong, because she was actually involved with a commoner boy from another school.

Or how younger boys looked up to and adored Reika-senpai and were competing for her affection.

The point was that the rumours were endless.

Not everything could be trusted though, because I knew that there were some definite

falsehoods mixed in.

For example, there was a rumour that one of those younger boys was Shop Boy-kun. We were all quietly aware that Shop Boy-kun actually liked Ririna-chan though.

And speaking of Ririna-chan, sometimes I didn't know what to do with her. Even though Shop Boy-kun had finally gained the courage to gift her a towel with her initials in it, she excitedly ran to give it to Reika-senpai instead. That was honestly just shocking~

But Ririna-chan had probably just wanted an excuse to give Reika-senpai a towel. And later on she bought the same towel. Ririna-chan, if you were going to do that anyway, why didn't you just give Reika-senpai the new one?

When Reika-senpai found out that it had been Shop Boy-kun's gift she was enraged, so Ririna-chan was depressed for a while.

That's why I gave Reika-senpai some information about the presidents of the sports club and asked her to forgive Ririna-chan.

"That information was very handy. Thank you very much," she told me with a smile later.

I was glad that I told her.

Before the School Festival, Reika-senpai asked me to investigate the manager of the Track Club. Apparently that manager was possibly a love rival for Reika-senpai's best friend.

In the past Reika-senpai had actually asked me to find out if anybody liked Akizawa-senpai. If I remembered correctly, there was a girl with a one-sided crush on him. In the end she ended up dating a boy that had liked her instead though.

This time, as it turned out, Reika-senpai's worries were founded; the manager was guilty.

Akizawa-senpai already had a childhood friend he was dating from another school, and that girl even showed up for large track matches or the school festivals.

But the manager didn't care at all. She often had conversations with her friends along

the lines of,

“That childhood friend doesn’t seem to like track at all. I think I’d understand senpai better than she would. And I spend more time with him too...”

“Well in that case you should keep trying. Snatch him from her.”

When I reported this to Reika-senpai, Reika-senpai turned sheet white with panic and said,

“What do I do? I’m going to be killed...”

Ririna-chan saw her expression and asked me what was going on, so I explained.

“Reika-san’s best friend...?” she said with a twitch of her eyebrow. “Tsugumi! We’re going to thoroughly investigate her friend’s boyfriend, as well as that manager!” she declared.

Aah~ Ririna-chan was going to rampage again...

In the end though, during the public day for the School Festival, the manager had apparently seen the two of them flirting with held hands so she gave up. Maybe she thought that she couldn’t compete after seeing them together. Not only that but the girlfriend in question was what you would expect from Reika-senpai’s best friend. Elegant, quiet, and the perfect Yamato Nadeshiko.

She must have felt a little uneasy being in a strange school, because she was gently holding onto his arm with her free hand. Exchanging looks with each other, she asked him what this or that was with a reserved smile on her face. Honestly, they were so lovey-dovey.

Sometimes that Yamato Nadeshiko-san would mention “Reika-san” in her conversations. When Ririna-chan heard it she had rushed up and introduced herself.

“So you must be Reika-san’s best friend! My name is Kotou Ririna, Reika-san’s younger cousin. I leave my unworthy older cousin in your care!”

Thanks to that, word quickly spread that Akizawa-senpai’s girlfriend was actually ‘Kisshouin Reika-sama’s best friend’. Perhaps that was also part of why the manager had given up.

If she made Reika-senpai's best friend cry, she would be making an enemy of Reika-senpai too, after all.

According to my sources, the boys in 2nd Year had actually given Reika-senpai quite a rude nickname.

Not only that but they said things like, "When Kisshouin Reika draws her Demon Fan, the school is soaked with a rain of blood."

What on earth were those people treating her as. Despite going on about how scary she was, they sure didn't hesitate to disrespect her.

I definitely couldn't let Ririna-chan know. If she did I could see her charging into the 2nd Year classrooms screaming, "Reika-san shall be avenged!"

But, the Soccer Club, Baseball Club, and the Basketball Club seemed genuinely afraid of her. It was probably because of that information that I gave her. Perhaps they issued a gag order for that meeting because no information on it reached me.

Even when I asked Reika-senpai, she just smiled, "That was a very productive meeting."

What the 2nd Year boys said was nonsense, but perhaps one thing really was true. The Demon Fan seemed to have been drawn...

The other day I spotted Reika-senpai taking a stroll through the courtyard. Even though it was still autumn she had a parasol with her. As expected of Reika-sama. But for some reason her friends were carrying shiny CD's with them. Was that some kind of good luck charm?

And what did she mean by "Fight me, Hitchcock!"

Aah~ But at the moment people were saying that the biggest threat to Reika-senpai's romance was Takamichi Wakaba-senpai. Perhaps it would be a good idea to investigate her as well...

Ririna-chan wasn't too familiar with rumours, so she hadn't seemed to have heard yet, but eventually this was going to turn into a huge mess, wasn't it...

Still, Reika-senpai had asked us to look after Ririna-chan, so if Ririna-chan went on a

rampage then it would be up to us to stop her, wouldn't it.

Both of them asking the other's friends to look after them. They really were cousins.

If I ever said this, I could see Ririna-chan shouting, "We aren't alike at all!"

Still, I'd bet that she would be really happy inside.

Finally, going back to Enjou-sama, I was hearing a weird rumour. I wonder if it was true...

Chapter 161

“Is something the matter, Mizusaki-kun?”

I mentally ran through anything I might have done to piss him off. Mn. Probably something to do with the Pivoine again.

While we were standing together in the hallway I noticed him shoot a harsh glance in the direction of the classroom.

Fellow Stalking Horse shifted his position so that he was shielding me from it.

“Are you okay?”

Okay? Huh?

“Whatever do you mean?”

“...Aren't you being extorted?”

“Hah?”

Extorted? Me? By Umewaka-kun and the others?

“Um, might I ask how you came to that conclusion...?”

“I've had reports about them using coupons with the Pivoine's crest. At first it was something to just keep in mind, but I was patrolling just now when I saw them pester you for something, so I stopped them just in case.”

“Aahh...”

So that was it. It wasn't just the tickets that set him off, but the coupons with the red peony symbol. After all, given the brown hair and piercings, they didn't exactly look the part of somebody closely acquainted with a Pivoine member.

“Kisshouin, if they've been pestering you for money but you're finding it hard to refuse,

I'll talk to them."

"Umm, Mizusaki-kun, it seems that you are misunderstanding, but those people over there are actually my friends."

"Friends? Yours? Those guys?"

I didn't know a face could look so doubtful.

Yeah, they were my friends. True, when we first met I thought they were annoying, and loud, and gaudy-looking, but even after I was cold with them they kept trying to befriend me. I considered them real friends now.

"Kisshouin, are you sure you're not being tricked? A lot of the students here at Suiran are sheltered, so they make for easy targets. You might not even have realised."

"Hold on, Mizusaki-kun."

Fellow Stalking Horse really didn't think well of them. Look more carefully, Stalking Horse. Umewaka-kun might be wearing gaudy silver earrings, but those are actually pad pads, you know? And none of the group are all that uncultured. I think you could say they're well brought up, relatively speaking. It's easy to get the wrong idea at a glance though.

"I am grateful for your concern, but not once have they pestered me for anything. We interact a lot at cram school, but never have they asked or expected me to treat them. Actually, they are the sort of people who gathered in the middle of the sweltering summer in order to help me with my exhibit for the Handicrafts Club. And I cannot know how exactly you see them, but let me tell you now that every one of them is a better student than I am, with far better grades."

And it was true. Even though they knew that I was a rich girl, nobody had ever asked me to shout them. Actually when I gave Umewaka-kun that bag for Beatrice he even treated me to some popular convenience store treats as a thank you.

"Incidentally, what you overheard earlier was my friend begging me to give him the dog plush toy I made. I modelled it off of his beloved dog, but apparently it looked so close to the real thing that he could scarcely help but ask for it. I suppose without context it might have been easy to misunderstand though."

“Plush toy...?”

“Indeed. In fact, he has been waiting quite excitedly for this day. As for the coupons, every Pivoine member ends up with much too many to ever spend on their own, so since they were coming here anyhow I wanted them to enjoy it.”

I peeked into the club room for a moment only to find Umewaka-kun still being restrained by everybody. Hadn’t stopped him from burying his face in Bea-tan though.

Yeah. That guy was not giving up until I agreed.

Spying on the same scene from behind me, I think Fellow Stalking had finally seen the truth.

What’s wrong, Fellow Stalking Horse? Is this your first time seeing a Dog Maniac? You’re naive if you think this is his worst. Shall I show you the Bea-tan role-playing emails? Ah, but if I showed you those you’d probably be wary in a different way, and try and convince me to break it off anyway.

“I hope that this has cleared things up.”

“...My bad. Sorry for doubting your friends, Kisshouin. But as the Student Council President I have an obligation to protect the students.”

“I see. Well, I sincerely thank you anyhow for your concern. I must say, however, that I am a tad surprised. I would never have expected the Student Council President to concern himself over a Pivoine member like myself.”

“That has nothing to do with it. If a student at Suiran is in trouble, then it’s the Student Council’s job to help.”

“...Even if this was the Pivoine’s President?”

“Of course,” he nodded.

There was no hesitation in his eyes.

Hmmm~ But he’d gone through a pretty hard time because of her. Not only had she completely thrashed him with her mouth, he even got in trouble with the school staff because of her. In his position I definitely wouldn’t help her.

With that in mind, I realised once again what an impressive person Fellow Stalking Horse was. I thought a little better of him.

“Well then, since things are clear, please excuse me. I have to return to my post.”

“Sure. If my behaviour has upset them, please let them know that I’ll be happy to apologise.”

“I understand.”

“Also Kisshouin, I might have overlooked it last time, but you’re not allowed to bring that fan to school anymore. I doubt anybody would disagree with me at this point that it’s a weapon.”

Eeehhh!? It’s not a weapon, it’s just a Rococo Queen’s prop!

“That guy just now was so cool! Who was he? Do you know him? Doesn’t the hot-guy ratio seem higher in Suiran?” the girls asked me, the moment I stepped back into the classroom.

Moriyama-san, what happened to Umewaka-kun...?

Speaking of Umewaka-kun, since he was still begging to adopt it, I told him to wait until the School Festival was over.

Umewaka-kun was overjoyed, and finally parted after giving it a kiss goodbye.

Anyhow, apparently everyone was going to the Science Club next for the planetarium. Also I think Moriyama-san had completely given up on him. Not that anybody could have helped it... He loved his dog so much that the love even extended to plush toys that resembled her. You’d be hard pressed to find a high school girl willing to accept a boy like that.

“That was an experience...” Minami-kun murmured after they left.

Sorry.

Once my shift was done, I met up with my group to tour the School Festival again.

“Reika-sama, apparently Kaburagi-sama went to Enjou-sama’s class again and had

some of Takamichi-san's biscuits."

"My, I see."

Kaburagi, huh... I suppose that settled things then. Things were going to get bothersome again after this school festival...

But I could enjoy what time I had left. Umewaka-kun's crew said that the Soccer Club's piadini was good, right? Maybe I'd try some.

So I suggested it to my group and we headed right over. When we arrived the Soccer Club President began pushing food onto me.

"You don't need to pay!"

The same thing happened when we arrived at the Baseball Club and Basketball Club.

Eh-, wasn't *I* doing the extorting then? Now it looked like I was travelling from place to place collecting protection money, didn't it?

Maybe Fellow Stalking Horse had a point about the fan...

When I returned to my classroom I changed and began serving again. I was going to do my best for the remaining hours! Oh, huh? Umewaka-kun and the others hadn't contributed to the Xu Fu's sales? Tsk, what worthless friends.

"Kyaa! It's Kaburagi-sama and Enjou-sama!"

The squeals of girls filled the store as the pair entered. What were they doing here. Oh, right, we were selling tea here.

Although the room suddenly got a lot noisier, at least the number of female customers was increasing. I suppose that was all right then.

Then I realised it wasn't just these two. Popping out from behind Enjou was Yukino-kun. Immediately my mood soared.

"Good afternoon, Kisshouin-san," began Enjou, "Yukino said he wanted to come here, so I came with him. I see you're wearing a cute Chinese outfit today."

“Good afternoon, Reika-oneesan!” said Yukino-kun.

“Good afternoon~ Yukino-kun, I am so glad you came! And welcome, Enjou-sama, Kaburagi-sama. Is it okay to leave your own class’ café, Enjou-sama?”

“My class has been packed since morning, so we’ve already sold out. That’s why we closed shop.”

“My, that is certainly...”

Tch. Thanks to the Enjou Effect, no doubt. *My* café still had plenty. If we still had some by the end we were going to split it between us.

“What the hell, Kisshouin,” Kaburagi exclaimed, “Where’s the dragon on your back? The road to completion is harder than it looks, isn’t it.”

“I do not harbour such an eccentric ambition, so...”

What the hell! Stop saying weird things in front of Yukino-kun! And look! Enjou was sniggering to the side! I knew it! That rabbit from the other day was some sort of harassment!

Anyhow, Kaburagi went with Tieguanyin tea, Enjou with chrysanthemum, and Yukino-kun with the flowering tea. Their orders reflected their personalities, didn’t it.

When their orders were ready I added some mooncakes on the house. After all, harassment or not I was still treated with a latte art without a ticket. Not that Kaburagi ate any.

“I’ve had enough sweet things for today,” he said.

Kaburagi, did you have too many of Wakaba-chan’s biscuits?

Still, although Kaburagi didn’t eat any, he didn’t ignore the moon cakes either. I watched him stuff some into his pockets. I guess he was taking them home. He was surprisingly dutiful about these things.

Yukino-kun was watching his tea flower in the water with a smile, so I couldn’t help but smile myself. Maybe he’d like some annin tofu as well.

The time passed with mostly Yukino-kun and I doing the talking. When it was time for them to leave, I saw them off in the hallway.

“I had a lot of fun today, Reika-oneesan,” he smiled.

“I was glad to see you too, Yukino-kun,” I smiled back.

We shared a little laugh. How on earth was this little angel born to the same household as that scoundrel Enjou?

Kaburagi was headed back to his own class, since they were holding a party to celebrate their hard work. I guess Kaburagi wasn't as anti-social as I thought.

I had only come out here to see them off, but somehow I ended up in another chat with Yukino-kun. He was just so darn cute after all. Enjou just stood to the side with a smile on his face.

That was when a girl's voice interrupted.

“Shuu.”

Shuu?

I looked on reflex, only to find Bird Brain Katsuragi, and some delicate-looking girl with black hair down to her shoulders. Eh? Who was this?

“Yuiko,” Enjou noticed her, looking a little surprised.

Was it somebody he knew?

Enjou smiled gently and approached her. Standing beside me, Yukino-kun gripped my hand. Hm? What's wrong, Yukino-kun?

“What are you doing here, Yuiko?”

“I heard that you were doing latte art at your school festival so I had Haru bring me,” she said with a soft voice. “Was I a little too late?”

She tilted her head a little in question.

It was a striking sight, with her stark white skin and faintly moist eyes.

The previously noisy hallway was silent now, and all eyes were on Yuiko-san. Even the ordinarily noisy Katsuragi Boy was behaving himself.

“My class’ café closed quite some time ago. But if you wanted to see some latte art there was no need to come here. I’ll draw you as many as you want at home.”

“Really? Then I’ll look forward to it.”

“Got it.”

The two of them seemed rather close. I wonder what this meant...

“Yukino, it’s about time to go home. Yuiko, what are you going to do?”

“Hmmm... I think I’ll go home with you too, Shuu. It wouldn’t be very fun without you, anyhow.”

Yukino-kun let go of my hand and returned to his brother’s side, his expression a little stiff.

“Well then, Kisshouin-san. Thanks for today.”

“Gokigen’yoh, Enjou-sama. Good bye, Yukino-kun.”

“Good bye, Reika-oneesan.”

Yuiko-san gave me a smile before comfortably slipping her arm around Enjou’s, the two of them leaving the hallway.

I stood there stunned for a little as the subdued Katsuragi Boy ran over to me.

“Yuiko-san is Enjou-san’s lover, and don’t you forget it,” he whispered in my ear before running after them.

When the four of them were out of sight, the hallway erupted.

“Who the hell was that!?”

“Don’t tell me that was Enjou-sama’s girlfriend!?”

“Nobody told me about this!”

“She was so beautiful... ‘Yuiko-san’... I wonder if we’ll meet again...”

That was when, oblivious to their surroundings, my cram school friends happily approached me, having had their fill of the planetarium.

“Whoaa! Kisshouin-saan! You’re wearing a *cheongsam*! Camera! Where’s my camera!”

“Wearing a cheongsam with your ringlets is kind of fresh in its own way.”

In the face of all the excitement and their care-free mood, I kind of just gave in and stopped thinking as I started striking poses for them.

“Maybe I should get Beatrice to wear a cheongsam too...”

Hey. Why not.

Chapter 162

When the School Festival was over, all anybody could talk about was how the Emperor ate Takamichi Wakaba's hand-made biscuits two days in a row, and how Enjou's mysterious girlfriend had appeared.

Thanks to that, things were noisier for me too.

"What do you think about all this, Reika-sama? How could Kaburagi-sama of all people eat home-made sweets? And he even went there two days in a row, and even bought extra to bring home with him!"

"Bring home? As I recall, those biscuits were just extras for the tea. They were not for sale, unless I am mistaken..."

"Well, it's Kaburagi-sama, so who would refuse... But it's not even that he really liked the biscuits. They were made by a number of people, but he only wanted the ones made by Takamichi-san."

You're being way too blunt, Kaburagi...

"Apparently on the second day all of the girls involved with baking the biscuits tried to give him theirs. The only ones he touched were Takamichi-san's though."

"Goodness... The biscuits Takamichi-san baked must have truly matched his palate."

"Why are you being so carefree, Reika-sama. Come on, you need to get your act together!" sulked Kikuno.

There wasn't much I could do though...

"This morning Kaburagi-sama greeted Takamichi-san in the hallway again..." mumbled Ayame-chan.

"I heard from girls in her class that whenever he comes to greet Enjou-sama he always greets her as well."

“It couldn’t be that Kaburagi-sama truly...”

“Hey-! Don’t say something so extreme!” Serika-chan said before covering her ears.

“Reika-sama? Have you heard anything from Kaburagi-sama?”

“What do you mean by ‘anything’?”

“Like we were saying, something about Takamichi-san. ...Has it ever come up in the conversations in the Pivoine?”

“Not so far as I can remember.”

The girls all sighed. Sorry for being useless, everyone.

“Should Kaburagi-sama not be free to love whomever he wants, though...?”

“Reika-sama! How could you say that! I don’t like it! How could somebody just monopolise Kaburagi-sama like that! All of the girls in Suiran agree with me!”

“You must be exaggerating...”

“No, it’s true!” declared Kikuno-chan without a shred of hesitation.

Everybody nodded along like it was natural.

I guess since Kaburagi was like an idol, it wasn’t strange that his fans acted the way idol fans did.

“Even if Kaburagi-sama did find a girlfriend, she would have to be somebody we could all accept. If it was Yurie-sama then all of us would have felt that it was inevitable, but I don’t think anybody would accept Takamichi-san.”

“Right? Her background is unsuitable for him, and aren’t her looks just normal? She’s basically only good at studying, right?”

“Oh no. What if Takamichi-san only came to Suiran to look for a rich man? That’s horrible!”

Whoa, whoa, please don’t just randomly decide that Wakaba-chan’s a gold digger.

“Does Takamichi-san seem so ill-natured?”

“Goodness, are you taking Takamichi Wakaba’s side over ours, Reika-sama?”

“That was not my intention...”

Oh boy. I could even make things worse if I wasn’t careful. Worse for both Wakaba-chan *and* me.

“By the way, who was that woman with Enjou-sama...” Ayame-chan changed the subject, with an expression that I couldn’t quite place.

Everybody exchanged glances.

“They seemed rather close...”

“She linked arms with Enjou-sama.”

“And she even called Enjou-sama ‘Shuu’...”

“Enjou-sama called her ‘Yuiko’ too.”

“It can’t be...”

Everyone seemed to be bitterly thinking the same thing. ‘Was that his girlfriend?’

“What do you think, Reika-sama?”

“I have no idea either...”

Katsuragi Boy called her ‘Enjou-san’s lover’ didn’t he. Not that it meant that it was true...

What I did know was why Bird Brain had picked so many fights with me now. The adulation in his eyes when he looked at her was something else. Not that I couldn’t understand it.

We only met for a short while, but Yuiko-san had a special atmosphere. It was transient and ephemeral like the moon rippling on the water.

I think my friends realised it too. They had none of the energy, unlike when it came to Wakaba-chan.

Yeah. That girl was scary. I don't think I could win.

"By the way, Reika-sama, who on earth were those boys taking photographs of you?"

"I think one of them had a lisp. When he said '*Reika-san, come over here~*' it sounded like he was saying '*Reika-tan, come over here~*'..."

Please don't bring that up...

Thanks to the stupid Kaburagi's thoughtlessness, girls were getting more and more jealous of Wakaba-chan. Not a few times I saw them muttered 'ugly' or 'don't get ahead of yourself' as they passed her. I guess it was a relief that Wakaba-chan didn't seem fazed though.

One morning I came to school earlier than usual, and came across Wakaba-chan in the shoe hallway. I thought that I should at least greet her. When I walked over though, I noticed that she seemed troubled.

"Gokigen'yoh, Takamichi-san. Is something the matter?"

"Eh-"

When she turned to face me, in her hands were a pair of in-door shoes stained with ink.

"Aaah... Yeah, uh, for some reason these turned pitch black..."

"..."

Obviously somebody did this. So mean.

"How about borrowing some slippers for now? I do not see you wearing those again. Once the school store opens you can buy yourself another pair."

"Hmmm... I guess even washing these wouldn't work, huh."

"...No, I suspect it would not. That does not look like watercolour ink. Perhaps it is

brush ink..."

"Who knows. But I really need it to wash off. It's really going to hurt my wallet otherwise..."

Oh right. The rest of us would have bought a new pair without another thought, but I guess it would be quite a burden on a commoner's budget. The stuff that Suiran used was pretty expensive after all.

"I don't mind insults and stuff but this kind of bullying is really a problem. Hmmm... Would bleach really not work though? I'd be okay with it for now if I could just get it to a light grey."

Suddenly, I remembered. I actually *had* bought a new pair without a thought before.

"Umm, I actually have a pair that are a little dirty, if you are fine with that."

"Ehh!?"

For now we had Wakaba-chan put on some slippers, and then we headed to the locker room. I opened my own locker, and brought out a bag from the very back of it. Inside were a pair of indoor shoes.

"Here."

"Eh!? These don't look dirty at all."

"They are dirty at the bottom."

She turned them over but still couldn't seem to find anything.

"They look clean, though?"

"...Actually, I stepped in pigeon droppings with these."

"Pigeon droppings...?"

"Indeed," I nodded gravely.

It was a nice early afternoon. I had been on a stroll with my friends after lunch, happily

thinking about how full I was, and what great weather it was.

That was when I stepped right into the bird poop. Fresh bird poop, still warm even, which was why I slipped a little.

“Aahh! Reika-sama stepped in poop!”

“Reika-sama! Let’s wash it off for now!”

I was led by the girls to the taps, still in shock and feeling a little dazed. We used a brush somewhere to clean it off, and it wasn’t hard since the soles were rubber. When we were done we even used disinfectant.

It was still gross to me though, and I didn’t want others to think I was wearing bird poop shoes, so I ended up just buying a new pair.

“I *have* washed and disinfected it, but...”

“...Is it really okay for me to take this from you? It looks brand new, you know?”

“True. But it has still been in pigeon droppings. Even you mind, surely?”

“No, not at all,” she declared.

She hadn’t hesitated at all.

“These look brand new. Actually I’m really thankful for them. Ah, but would the size fit? I’ve got pretty big feet. I’m a size 23.5.”

“...I am a size 24.”

“Eh? Then isn’t that just perfect? Ehehe,” she laughed.

Thank goodness. If I managed to help Wakaba-chan then that there was a meaning in stepping in that bird poop!

“Did they do this to your shoes yesterday...?”

Or had they come to school earlier? Maybe they were still watching...

“Hard to say. Ah! It looks like it fits perfectly! Thank you very much!”

“No, they had pigeon dropping on them so pay it no mind... Still, thank goodness I happened to come early today.”

I was actually here to prepare for one of my weaker subjects in the library.

“Yeah. Thanks to that I came away with shoes that were even cleaner than my own ones. What luck!”

God, she was such an optimist.

“You seem quite early yourself, Takamichi-san. Was there some reason to it today?”

“Oh, I always come early just to make sure I’m not late. Since I catch the train here there are accidents and delays sometimes, you know~ Can’t let that perfect attendance award go!” she clenched a fist.

Aah~ So she was worried about the train. Thinking back, that incident with the bike was because of a cancelled train too, wasn’t it. And wow, was she eager for perfect attendance. Going after the money bonus, huh.

“But if that is the only issue, then could you not simply apply for proof of lateness?”

“Well yeah, but that feels like running away to me. And I’d miss out on class too.”

Wow! You’re amazing, Wakaba-chan! As expected of one of our grade’s top 3 talents.

Anyway, since people were going to come soon, I said goodbye to Wakaba-chan and headed for my own room.

Chapter 163

Even though it was his fault that Wakaba-chan was being bullied, Kaburagi was sitting in the Salon, happily sipping away at tea.

Apparently he talked to Wakaba-chan again. Dumbass.



I was enjoying matcha rolls on my favourite sofa when Enjou came along.

“Kisshouin-san, thanks for humouring Yukino during the School Festival.”

“It was my pleasure.”

I hadn’t been to the Petite Pivoine since the School Festival ended. I wonder if he was doing well.

The two of us chatted about Yukino and the School Festival for a while.

“Recently Yukino has been obsessed with trying to do latte art too.”

“Goodness, Yukino-kun is?”

“I’m the one who has to drink his creations though. Every day my own little brother makes me drink a coffee he drew a heart on. Still not quite sure how I feel about that,” Enjou smiled helplessly.

I, on the other hand, was busy imagining little Yukino-kun, trying his very best to make latte art. It was so cute that it was all I could do to avoid squirming.

Speaking of latte art though, wasn't Enjou going to draw Yuiko-san some~? Maybe now would be a good time to ask about her.

"Speaking of which, Katsuragi-kun from our middle school section came to visit. With a girl in tow, as well."

"Well..."

Enjou made a show of trying to remember, before breaking into an amused smile.

"Yuiko and I have become quite the rumour, haven't we."

"That *does* seems to be the case."

"Are you interested too, Kisshouin-san?"

"Why, not at all."

It was kind of irritating to be treated like some gossip. Well, I actually *was* interested though.

"I've told quite a few girls already, but Yuiko is a relative."

"I see."

I'd heard this tidbit as well. 'But for relatives they were awfully...' That was basically my thoughts on it.

"It looks like they're still saying that Yuiko's my girlfriend though."

"That seems to be the case, yes. I have heard the rumours myself."

"Yuiko isn't my girlfriend."

Eh-, really? But Katsuragi Boy claimed that she was your lover, you know?

"Oh? Was that unexpected?"

"Well, yes. Katsuragi-kun told me as much, so..." I sneakily tattled on him.

“Aaah. Well, he’s always kind of adored her, so...”

Enjou gave another helpless smile.

‘Adored’. Mhm, that seems about right.

“She’s *not* my girlfriend though.”

“Aah.”

“She’s my fiancéé.”

“Aah!?”

Fiancéé!? Enjou’s!?

My eyes shot open and my whole body radiated shock when Enjou suddenly burst into laughter.

“‘Aah’? Just now you made an incredible expression, Kisshouin-san. Don’t tell me you believed me?”

“Haah?”

Was that a joke!? Which was it!? Stop making fun of me, you twisted guy!

“To be accurate, she’s a “candidate” for my engagement.”

“Candidate?”

“Yep. Since we were basically the same age, there’s always been talk about that. Since there was nothing official, she’s a candidate.”

“I see...”

Fiancéé...

“Hmmm...”

For some reason I was in a bit of a funk when I got home. It felt like I was being left

behind, somehow.

Even though we were all still high schoolers, some of the people in my grade were already thinking about engagements. It had me shaken. Since I'd known Enjou since primary, my feelings were a little complicated.

To me, marriage was something I'd always thought of as some far-off future.

"The future, huh..."

I rolled atop my bed for a while.

If I was being honest with myself, I never really thought about my future seriously. I spent most of my days focusing on the present.

As long as Otousama and Oniisama kept working hard at the company, our family wasn't going to collapse either. I'd be able to do whatever I wanted without worrying about earning money for the family.

But that was the problem. I didn't have anything I wanted to do. How could anybody have no dreams like this!

Still, maybe it was because of how I grew up, but I really wanted a real job. Not even in my dreams would I ever think about becoming an idol or something.

Being a civil servant would be ideal, but I'm not sure if it would be okay for the Kisshouin family's only daughter to become one...

Maybe it would be a good idea to start looking into good jobs.

The future...

Tsk. Thanks to Enjou my mind was filled with serious thoughts now.

When I arrived at school the next morning I saw Kaburagi speaking to Wakaba-chan at the entrance. Pay attention to the eyes around you, Kaburagi!

When Wakaba-chan noticed me, she gave a little hop and tapped her shoes together. Kaburagi noticed and asked her,

“Huh. Takamichi, are you studying tap dancing?”

Thank goodness he was an idiot as usual.

When the weekend came around I visited the library. Since I’d been so busy with Beatan, it was the first time in a while. Maybe Naru-kun would be here~ Oh, there he was!

With a reference book for job requirements in hand, I picked a seat next to Naru-kun that was luckily free.

Since Naru-kun was busy with his exercise book, he didn’t notice my passionate gaze at all. Aah, wasn’t there anything with his name on it?

Since I couldn’t exactly turn my head and start staring at him, I pretended to read my book while leering to the side. If only I had a second face for times like this!

Maybe I could pretend to drop my pen. It worked in shoujo manga.

Wait, what was I even doing. I wasn’t going to deny that Naru-kun was part of it, but my motivation for today was also supposed to be thinking about my future.

What kind of qualifications would be good for my future? Tax consulting, accounting, law... All of them looked too hard for me.

I mean, I loved looking at my bankbook, but I sucked at maths, and I wasn’t prepared to be responsible for somebody’s life either.

What else then. Yeah, I think a civil servant with lots of fringe benefits would be best.

Suddenly, I noticed Naru-kun taking some printouts out of a clear plastic folder. Wasn’t this my chance to finally get his personal information!?

With my very best efforts at sneaking a glance, I found the name of a national high school at the top of what looked to be a practice test.

Wasn’t this the name of Aoi-chan’s high school!? It had to be fate this time, right!?

I immediately pulled out my phone to contact her when a message from Aira-sama arrived.

‘Masaya’s found a new love!?’

Chapter 164

Kaishi (懐紙, lit. pocket paper) is white paper used for miscellaneous purposes. It is usually in the form of a pad of paper folded in half. The name indicates that it is paper kept handy in the bosom overlap of the kimono.

According to the email from Aira-sama, Kaburagi had shown interest in a certain girl. It was without a doubt Wakaba-chan.

Since I wasn't quite sure how to respond, I put it on the backburner for now. Instead, I decided to message Aoi-chan about Naru-kun's name first.

Next to me, Naru-kun was still engrossed in his studies, oblivious to what I was doing. I never got the chance to see the real Naru-kun do so, but there must have been times when he looked like this too.

Aoi-chan hadn't replied yet so I began seriously looking through my own book. Sitting *juust* a little closer to Naru-kun.

I replied to Aira-sama's message when I got home. I decided to avoid going out of my way to spread more rumours about Wakaba-chan, so instead I just replied,

'Oh? Truly? Who might the girl be?'

Not long afterwards she called me.

"Long time no see, Reika-chan. Have you been well?"

"It has been a while, Aira-sama!"

It had been a long time since we had spoken like this, what with how busy she was with university. It was really nice to talk to her again.

Both Yurie-sama and Aira-sama had something on this year so they hadn't come to the School Festival. I spent a while chatting with her about what attractions we had this

year, and what I did with the Handicrafts Club.

“Anyway, about that girl I mentioned in my email.”

“Yes?”

Apparently Yurie-sama was the first to realise. It was because Kaburagi had been acting strangely since the summer break.

“The other day Masaya went to Yurie’s house to visit. The thing is, the gift he brought were some really plain looking desserts that he’d never touch. As it turns out, it was made by the family of a girl from Suiran.

“He even boasted that he had tried all the cakes from their shop, and that this was the best one. The problem was that it didn’t seem like he was just fond of the cakes.

“‘She’s a pretty interesting one.’

“‘She’s a weirdo.’

“She tried to put this strange sticker on her bike.’

“Yurie said that all he could talk about was this girl.”

Kaburagi went to Wakaba-chan’s house!? His stalking tendencies were still healthy and well, it seemed.

And more importantly, he had already conquered all of the cakes in her family store!? That sneak! How dare he get a march on me! I wanted to eat them too! There was that éclair I still wanted to try!

“When I think about it, it might have been this budding new love that helped him get over Yurie. She was really glad to see how happy he was.”

“I see.”

“Although to be honest I was secretly hoping for *you* two to get together, Reika-chan.”

“What on earth are you saying, Aira-sama.”

I really wish she wouldn't say such ominous things. Getting involved with Kaburagi was as good as plunging into a Bad End.

"Do you have anyone *you* like, Reika-chan?"

"Eh!?"

Somebody I like? Ummmm. I suppose right now I was most interested in Naru-kun from the library but...

"Not in particular."

"Oh my~ Why isn't that lonely?"

"Do you, Aira-sama?"

"Hmmmm~"

Ngn, I really wanted to know. What would I do if my respected Aira-sama ended up falling for some weirdo?

After that I listened to Aira-sama talk about the Suiran girls in uni, and what they planned to do after graduating. Aira-sama was planning on looking for a job, but quite a few people were planning on just getting married or staying at home to learn how to be a bride.

And apparently basically nobody was planning on becoming a civil servant...

Thanks to Kaburagi, Wakaba-chan's bullying was worse than ever.

These days it was often to see Fellow Stalking Horse escorting Wakaba-chan like a bodyguard. This just worsened the opinion of Wakaba-chan amongst the girls.

Speaking of Wakaba-chan, in Suiran's high school section, once a week it was necessary to attend one special elective class from flower arrangement, tea ceremony, calligraphy, kendo, or kyudo.

The main reason this system was in place was for the sake of the External Students joining our high school section from normal households.

Most girls picked flower arrangement or tea ceremony. I for one had been doing the latter since 1st Year. The reason I didn't pick flower arrangement was because the school of flower arrangement that I attended followed a different style to Suiran's. Don't let anybody tell you it was because I had no confidence in my sense of flower arrangement aesthetics. Because that's not true, okay?

It was an artistic decision on my part that I would only ever use warabi-grip shears. That's why I couldn't participate in Suiran's flower arrangement classes. I wasn't running away. Don't doubt me, okay?

I'm the sort of girl who can do anything she puts her mind to.

Wakaba-chan was probably trying to experience everything Suiran had to offer. Unlike last year when she did flower arrangement, this year she changed to tea ceremony.

The problem was that she really should have done it the other way around... Unlike flower arrangement, the content for tea ceremony changed a little bit each year.

Last year we were practising the basis like how to use the fukusa cloth, up to making usucha with the Bonryaku Temae procedure. That would have been easier. The Bonryaku Temae didn't use many tools so it was harder to fail.

But this year we were moving onto the Furo Temae. Just the fact that it had more steps to remember made it more difficult. It wasn't something you could succeed in after skipping the basics. Even if you could memorise all the steps from a book, actually performing it right was a different story.

Honestly, tea ceremony was just a pain. There were so many things to remember. Even the number of steps you walked mattered. Basically it wasn't something you could learn overnight.

Based on that point alone, it would have been easier to start flower arrangement in the second year instead. As long as you remembered the basics, the rest was up to your sense of aesthetics.

Plus, you were allowed to bring home the flowers you used. It was a pretty good deal.

Suiran being Suiran, the flowers available for use were both plentiful and gorgeous. Worlds apart from the gloomy arrangements you might find for funeral altars.

Anyhow, the point was that today was Wakaba-chan's turn as the host of the tea ceremony. I prayed that she wouldn't mess up.

But contrary to my wishes...

"...!?"

The ladle that she left on the kettle fell onto the ground!

I could already hear snickers.

Red-faced, Wakaba-chan bowed and apologised as the sensei made her clean it.

Aaah! I know how you feel, Wakaba-chan! God, do I know how you feel!

One time during a tea ceremony, the confection I had in my kaishi paper fell out and rolled right across the room! It was amazing just how far it rolled, honestly. I think it was because of the shape. By the time I had reached out with my hand it was too late. If I didn't know better I would have thought it'd never stop.

That was a horrible day. At the time I had wished that I could just become an amnesiac and never have to remember it. I was even seriously considering pretending to pass out from anaemia to save myself the shame.

Uugh...! My stomach hurt just remembering it!

Since then my heart would begin to thump whenever the confections for the day were round.

To begin with, why was it necessary to balance them on kaishi just to eat them. Bring me a plate, damnit!

"Well, with her upbringing..."

"So disgraceful..."

The girls in the room weren't letting go of the opportunity to badmouth her either. Aah, what was I supposed to do...

"Ah, umm, might this confection be a sasanqua?" I tried to change the subject.

Thankfully the teacher was all about it.

“Goodness, Kisshouin-san. Well done. You are quite right. Although it is easy to mistake it for the camellia japonica, the confection today was indeed modelled off the camellia sasanqua.”

Everyone was focused on the confection! Now, Wakaba-chan! Now’s your chance to move onto the next step!

Oh no! She was nodded along with interest too! Now’s not the time for that, Wakaba-chan!

In the end, although she messed up a number of times and the teacher had to correct her, Wakaba-chan eventually managed to finish her temae procedure.

I was worried that she would be upset after being laughed at so many times, so I checked up on her. Instead, I found her having fun sneakily packing away the leftover confections that sensei gave her for trying hard.

Mn. That was Wakaba-chan for you...

It was my first session in a while with Mihara-san at the Imperial Palace. I had my hair in a ponytail and was ready to go!

I think I was doing quite a lot better than when I first started during the summer, even if I did say so myself. My stamina was better too.

Huu huu, haa haa.

I was still running when the flying lady of a white Rolls Royce stopped beside me.

While I was wondering what was happening, Mihara-san had already stepped in front of me protectively. Thinking about it, he was actually hired as my bodyguard, wasn’t he.

Don’t tell me I was about to have an encounter with the underworld? I hoped it was just somebody who wanted to cheer me on.

While I was thinking, the rear window wound down and out popped Kaburagi’s face.

“So it really *was* you.”

“Kaburagi-sama!”

So the owner of this ostentatious car was Emperor Kaburagi.

Don’t tell me this was the car he used to run down Wakaba-chan? If it was then I was impressed she got off with just some bruises.

Still, if she was run down by this imposing beast of a car then it was little wonder that her family turned down the compensation money. This did *not* look like the car of somebody in a respectable occupation...

“What are you doing here?”

“What, you ask? Why, I was jogging, as you can see.”

If you understand then don’t make me talk so much, dimwit. Isn’t it obvious what I was doing?

I was still out of breath from it, actually.

“Jogging? All I saw was somebody running on the spot. People were *walking* faster than you were. It was weird so I stopped to see what was going on when it turned out to be you.”

What the heeell!?

What do you mean ‘running on the spot’!? I was making progress, damnit! Damn you! *Damn you! Damn you!*

You don’t have a shred of courtesy or consideration or delicacy at all!

“Even though you’ve got that Jamaican hairdo going on, you kind of put their runners to shame, huh. Ah well, do your best I guess. Cya.”

After running his mouth off, he got back into his mobile Parthenon and drove off as I trembled in anger.

“...Ojousama, there’s nothing wrong with going at your own pace, okay?”

Get dumped, Kaburagi. Get dumped by Wakaba-chan, damn you! You should just get dumped and go on a journey again!

I began cursing at the long-gone car.

Chapter 165

Aoi-chan messaged me today.

When I first emailed her a few days ago she replied that she didn't know what Narukun's name was, but would look into it.

According to the message just now, the result of her investigation was that there was indeed somebody like that in 3rd Year.

Thank you for going out of your way to find out for me, Aoi-chan!

A third year student. Thanks to my efforts in leering I had managed to see his name and school, but I didn't manage his class or grade. Now I had moved forward a step, uhuhu.

In that same email though, was the line,

'Actually, the truth is I have something I'd like your advice on, Reika-chan.'

Advice? Mine? For Aoi-chan?

Given how much more reliable Aoi-chan was compared to me it wasn't often that she asked me for help. As her friend I had to give my best this time!

Since we were going to be talking anyway, I thought it might be a good idea to just meet up. The two of us immediately checked our schedules and promised to meet up on a day when we had nothing after school.

When my car arrived at the café I got off and began walking the short distance to the entrance.

The further we got into winter, the colder the air got. It wasn't too bad for me since I was driven everywhere, but for people like Wakaba-chan who commuted by train it must have been terrible.

In my past life I went to school with two pairs of stockings and hand warmers stuck

to my back. Wearing a second pair of stockings made the stitching stand out in a strange wood pattern, but wearing a skirt was just so cold in the middle of winter so I had no choice but to bear it.

Winters sure were rough back then... I wonder what Wakaba-chan was going to do once the snow began to fall this year. It wasn't like she could wear gum boots after all...

Before long I made it to the café. Looking inside, I realised that Aoi-chan was already here.

"Aoi-chan, sorry I'm late!"

"Reika-chan!"

She looked up from her phone and greeted me with a smile. Aahh, I was being healed already...

I ordered an apple cinnamon tea for myself.

"So what's wrong, Aoi-chan? You wanted my help with something?"

"Well, you see, there's actually this 2nd year boy who goes to Suiran..." she explained before giving me his name.

"Reika-chan, do you know him?"

"Sorry, but I'm not that familiar with boys' names. Maybe if we were in the same class, but..."

Hmmm... It didn't sound familiar at all. I guess we'd never been in the same class before.

"What about him though?"

"Well, the truth is... He's just been a little persistent..."

"Eh?"

According to Aoi-chan, this Suiran boy was attending the same cram school as her. Since the summer cram course they had together, he had continually asked her out.

Even after she refused him, he stubbornly kept trying to get close to her...

“Something like that really happened...?”

“Mhm. I told him that he was bothering me but then he even ambushed me on my way home...”

“Ambushed!? How scary.”

“Yeah...”

But I suppose you could say that he was just driven by his feelings of love... I couldn't criticise him too much since I had asked Aoi-chan to look up Naru-kun's personal information for me. You could even say that he was more respectable than I was since he wasn't sneaking about.

“So you aren't interested in dating this boy at all?”

“Well, I can't say that I am. To begin with, I'm already seeing someone.”

“Eh!?!”

Aoi-chan just casually mentioned something huge!

“Aoi-chan, you had a boyfriend!?”

“Mhm.”

“Ehh!?”

My ears hadn't failed me! She had a boyfriend! I haven't heard about this at all, Aoi-chan!

“Since when!?”

“Eh? Since a bit before the summer break, I guess.”

“Ehh!?”

But we met up during the summer break! How come she wouldn't tell me something

so important!? I'm in shock, Aoi-chan! Shock!

"I had no idea..."

"Aah~ Well, I didn't think it was something to go out of my way to bring up I guess? And you've never really seemed one for romance, Reika-chan."

But I am! Actually, my half of my mind is filled up with nothing but topics of romance! It's so bad that I became a mini-stalker just because I spotted some guy in the library! Not that I won't still be village chief by this Christmas!

"Well!? What's your boyfriend like?"

"Hm, he's in the Tennis Club with me. When we entered 2nd Year we started walking home together. In the end he confessed to me, and we ended up dating."

"I see."

Dates in uniform, like I used to dream about in my old life. Not only was she studying hard at a national high school, and having fun playing sports in her Tennis Club, Aoi-chan even had a boyfriend. She really seemed to be living a fulfilling high school life, didn't she.

With the exception of Minami-kun, every member of the Handicrafts Club was female. The only boys I was close with were part of a maidens society. Far from having a boyfriend, I hadn't even been confessed to, so instead of a spring, each day was like frosty winter.

"Reika-chan, for some reason your face has kind of turned into a noh mask..."

"You're imagining things, Aoi-chan."

Right. I had to be happy for my friends. Be more large-hearted, Reika!

"So anyhow, basically that boy is bothering you, right?"

"Yeah. Even after I told him that I had a boyfriend he wouldn't give up..."

"Hmmm."

Then why couldn't she just get her boyfriend to protect her. No, no, stop sulking, Reika! Aoi-chan is an important friend!

"Got it. I'll do something about him."

"Eh-, really!? But are you going to be okay, Reika-chan?"

Aoi-chan might not have known the kind of position I held in Suiran, but I was obviously going to be fine.

Still, it wouldn't be very prudent if I didn't investigate him first. I didn't want to hurt this boy's pure heart.

Or so I had been thinking, but the guy making passes at Aoi-chan had turned out to be one of the boys leading the attacks on Wakaba-chan.

It wasn't only girls bullying her. Some of the boys were harassing her because they were jealous of her scores.

The verdict was pretty much out, right?

I was considering meeting the problem boy after school when it suddenly got noisy outside the window.

"Reika-sama, Kaburagi-sama arrived at school with Takamichi-san!" one of my group members rushed into the classroom to report.

"Oh my. Again? As I recall, last time they met by chance outside. Is there really any need to cause such a fuss?"

"It's different this time! Takamichi-san was riding in his car!"

"Ehh!?"

Even I was shocked. Why was she coming to school in his car!?

"What do you think this means!?"

"I am not sure..."

Even Kaburagi wouldn't have gone to her house to pick her up, right? Then again, this was Kaburagi we were talking about...

Everybody was watching the hallway as Kaburagi came in chatting happily with a troubled-looking Wakaba-chan.

If gazes were lasers then Wakaba-chan would be completely burnt right now.

"Masaya."

Enjou had arrived at school first and was coming out now.

"Oh! Morning, Shuusuke! You're already here, huh."

"Morning, Masaya. Good morning to you too, Takamichi-san."

"Good morning."

"So why might you two be together today?"

Enjou had asked the question that everyone here wanted to know.

"Ah, well I saw Takamichi walking outside by chance, and since it was raining pretty hard I had her get onboard."

"Oh, I see."

Judging from Wakaba-chan's uncomfortable laughter, I was pretty sure he had forced her in.

Tsuruhana-san's group was standing in the hallway with the eyes of hitmen—

Kaburagi, you one-track-minded idiot!!

The squad of hitmen made their move at lunchtime.

Chapter 166

Thanks to that thoughtless, one-track-minded, idiot Kaburagi, Tsuruhana-san's group was completely gearing up for war.

I was having lunch with my friends in the cafeteria when it happened. Quite a while into lunch break, Wakaba-chan entered the cafeteria in a tracksuit. And looking closely, wasn't her hair drenched?

Wakaba-chan made her way over to the closest table and began quickly eating her simmered food bentou.

"Whaat on earth is that girl doing?" muttered one girl.

"Beats me. Who can tell with a weirdo like her," snarked another.

Amidst all our white uniforms, Wakaba-chan's tracksuit stood out all the more. You could hear whispers here and there.

I scanned the room and realised that Tsuruhana-san's group seemed to be having a lot of fun ridiculing her. Don't tell me they did something?

Apparently the people at the Pivoine table had noticed her too because Kaburagi was making his way over.

"Takamichi, what's with the outfit?"

A shock ran through the cafeteria.

In front of this entire crowd, the Emperor was going out of his way to talk to a girl. A girl who was none other than Wakaba-chan, who was the centre of all manner of rumours these days.

All eyes were on them.

Wakaba-chan quickly chewed and swallowed before answering.

“My uniform kind of got drenched so I changed into something else.”

“Drenched? How come?” he frowned.

“I went outside for a bit.”

“Outside? In this rain? Without an umbrella?”

I couldn't help but look outside. It had been pouring since morning and was showing no signs of letting up.

“Aah, well...”

“What the heck are you even doing.”

“Sorry.”

Wakaba-chan bowed.

“Well? Why were you running outside in all this rain then?”

Tsuruhana-san's group was looking a little worried now.

“Aahh, I had something to do...”

“I'm asking what that was.”

Wakaba-chan floundered, her eyes swimming here and there. It didn't seem like she was going to tell him the truth.

That was when Fellow Stalking Horse came over in worry for her.

“Are you alright, Takamichi?”

“Mizusaki-kun.”

Kaburagi seemed a little sullen at the new arrival.

“What do you want, Mizusaki? Takamichi and I were talking.”

“You can’t guess? The entire room is watching you two. Pay some more attention to your position, and your surroundings while you’re at it. How can you not tell that Takamichi is being troubled by you”

“Haah?”

Kaburagi glared at Stalking Horse who gave him a strong gaze back. While sparks seemed to fly between the two boys, Wakaba-chan was flustered, and quite obviously fretting about running out of time for her lunch.

Not content to just watch, Enjou intervened and somehow defused the situation. Pitifully, that was when the bell began to ring.

In a last act of desperation, Wakaba-chan tried to shovel as much of her lunch into her mouth as possible before slowly closing the lid.

Enjou led Kaburagi out of the cafeteria. Fellow Stalking Horse was about to leave with Wakaba-chan when the President of the Pivoine approached from behind with her followers.

“Takamichi-san, although that tracksuit suits you better than the Suiran uniform, I hope you are not thinking of doing something as absurd as returning home in that. I would much appreciate that you by all means refrain from such a thing.”

After shooting Wakaba-chan a cold look, she turned away and walked off.

Some of the girls began to laugh at her.

“Serves her right.”

“She’s such an eyesore.”

“Grill her more.”

That was when I realised some of the voices were male.

When I turned around, I found a group of boys to be the source, the boy who liked Aoi-chan among them. He was standing there with a disgusting smile as he joined in on bad-mouthing Wakaba-chan.

This boy really wasn't fit for Aoi-chan.

After school I went to the salon to fetch what I needed before heading right back to the 2nd Year classrooms.

The boy that had been bothering Aoi-chan was in the same class as Fellow Stalking Horse.

Fellow Stalking Horse noticed when I called him out into the hallway, and moved to casually listen in.

Gosh, Mizusaki-kun. You don't have to worry. My fan is sitting safely at home.

"Um, can I help you?" he asked uncertainly.

The boy was very obviously confused at the sudden summon.

Hmph. Quite a different attitude to when he was badmouthing Wakaba-chan. From what I had heard, he had a university faculty that he wanted to join but didn't have the grades for. So instead he had done all sorts of things to make life hard for her because he was jealous.

"Yes. The truth is I have called you here in regards to my friend."

"Your friend, Kisshouin-san?"

"Yes, my friend. Her name is Yorino Aoi."

"Eh-, Yorino...!?"

The colour left his face in an instant. Wow. Who knew that humans could change colours this quickly.

"...Um, so what does that have to do with...?"

"You still fail to understand?"

"Eh...?"

I flourished the peony branch before him like a conductor's baton. His expression

stiffened as he backtracked a step.

“My dear friend is being troubled by somebody. This makes me incredibly sad. So sad, in fact, that I have no idea what I might do...”

I stabbed the branch at his throat.

“You *will* stop, no?”

“...!? I will-!”

He was standing at attention now. I nodded with a smile.

“Also, it is very unbecoming of a man of Suiran to be jealous of a girl for her good grades, you know?”

I brandished the peony branch again, and then watched as he scrambled back into his classroom.

Mission complete, I suppose.

Now I just had to message Aoi-chan.

“What was that about?” asked Stalking Horse as he appeared from the shadows.

“He has a crush on a friend of mine but was a little too persistent, so she came to me for help.”

“I see... But Kisshouin, you realise that using that branch is even worse than the fan, right?” he sighed as he pointed at my branch.

Resting his chin in his other hand, he continued.

“Anyhow, do something about that weapon in your hand. I’m pretty sure a peony in the hands of a Pivoine member is as good as a lethal weapon.”

Even if you tell me that~

At that moment, by unlucky coincidence the Soccer Club President was just heading past us to get to his club. When he saw me he shrieked, so I handed him the branch as

encouragement.

His hands were ice cold though. I wonder if he was coming down with something.

“Are you trying to finish him off or something!? He’s the ace of our Soccer Club!”

Goodness, no. How could you blame me when I only ever have the best intentions in mind?

When I arrived at the carpark I witnessed Kaburagi forcing Wakaba-chan into his car again. This was actually an abduction now.

What on earth are you doing, Kaburagi.

Chapter 167

Shichi-Go-San (七五三, lit. "Seven-Five-Three") is a traditional rite of passage and festival day in Japan for three- and seven-year-old girls and three- and five-year-old boys, held annually on November 15 to celebrate the growth and well-being of young children. Children are dressed up and then brought to a shrine for good fortune.

Hinamatsuri (雛祭り Hina-matsuri), also called Doll's Day or Girls' Day, is celebrated each year on March 3 when people pray for the happiness and healthy growth of girls. Families with young daughters mark this day by setting up a display of dolls inside the house. They offer rice crackers and other food to the dolls.

These dolls, often expensively made, are placed on stepped shelves covered with red fabric, and girls invite their friends to admire them.

The next weekend I used the excuse of buying cake to visit Wakaba-chan.

Her mum still remembered me, and greeted me with a smile.

"Oh my, welcome!"

"Good afternoon. Thank you for everything, last time."

"Not at all! Thank you so much for the wonderful tea and coffee. Are you here to see Wakaba?"

"Yes, but I planned on buying some of your cakes as well. The ones I tried last time were simply delicious."

"Really? Auntie was a little worried that it wouldn't suit the tastes of an ojousama from Suiran."

"That was not the case at all. They were fluffy, and sweet without being too sickening. I could eat any number of them."

I had eaten two in a row when I got home. Then I waited a little while and ate the rest too. They were great...

I wondered what I would bring home this time.

“It makes me really happy to hear that. Wakaba still hasn’t come back from her part-time job yet, but she should be back any moment so come on inside.”

“Eh...? No, I really should not. I think I will head home for today. It was my fault for coming here unannounced. And to begin with my first goal was simply to buy some cakes.”

“Geez, you can worry about the cakes later. Do you have anything else going on today?”

“No, not particularly...”

As the Chief of Forever Alone Village, my weekends were almost completely free.

“Then just stay! You’ve already come all the way here. Don’t be shy now. Wakaba will be back any moment now. Okay?”

“But...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine.”

After asking the other staff member to take over for a bit, she came out from behind the display counter.

Taking my hand, she rather assertively ushered me into the house.

As I headed in, I noticed an awfully expensive-looking flower arrangement in the corner of the shop.

I had a bad feeling about it.

“Kisshouin-san, wasn’t it? Come in, come in. Here, sit down!”

After sitting me down on the couch she even brought out some black tea.

“Sorry. Not only have I arrived unannounced, I am even causing trouble for you like

this...”

“It’s fine! A friend of Wakaba’s has come all the way here to play, so this much is natural. Oh, I know! I’ll go message Wakaba and let her know not to go on any detours.”

“I truly am sorry,” I bowed again.

Not everybody had as much free time on their hands as I did, after all. I was definitely in the wrong here for showing up without checking with her first.

But since I was here to eat something and bring some cakes home too, I just thought it would be nice if we could hang out a little.

“Um, it is not much but...”



Karintou is a traditional Japanese snack food. Sweet and deep-fried, it is made primarily of flour, yeast, and brown sugar.

I held out the box of assorted karintou.

“Hmm? What might this be? Oh my, you didn’t need to. Thank you though. Oh! It’s karintou. How cute~”

There were different flavours like plum and chilli, and they were divided into cute little sacks. The presentation was great. It was one of my favourites.

Plus, part of the reason I choose these was because I wasn’t sure if it would be rude gifting Japanese sweets to a family that ran a cake shop.

“If my anklebiters spot these they’ll be gone in an instant. Aunty will make sure to hide them somewhere safe,” she said as she hugged the bag with mock protectiveness.

“Huhu!”

I liked this interaction. It reminded me of my mum from my old life.

“Wakaba’s shift finishes at 2 so she *should* be here soon.”

“Oh, I see.”

It was almost half past two when I checked.

“How is Wakaba doing at school? Is that girl doing alright at a school like Suiran?”

Ugh! She hit where it hurt. No way did she know how hard Wakaba-chan had it at school.

“Yes. Takamichi-san’s grades are exceptional, and recently she even joined the Student Council, you know? She seems to be getting along splendidly with them.”

“I see. I’m glad that she’s managing,” she smiled in relief. It hurt to see.

“I’m back!”

That was when Wakaba-chan came back. I heard her footsteps against the floor as she ran into the room, taking off her scarf.

“You said that Kisshouin-san came over?”

When she saw me sitting on the sofa, she smiled.

“Welcome.”

Her mother and I welcomed her home, and I apologised to her for intruding.

“Since you’re here now, I’ll be heading back to the store,” said her mum, so I thanked her again before she left.

“So what’s up, Kisshouin-san? Did you need something?”

“Well, no... I just wanted to eat some of your cake again because they were so delicious last time. Since I was coming here anyhow, I just thought it might be nice to see you, was all.”

“Oh okay. Sorry for making you wait then.”

“No, it is my fault for suddenly coming here... I had no idea you worked though.”

“Eh? Ahh, yeah. Just for lunchtimes on weekends at a family restaurant. That time when I met you I was coming back from work too.”

“Oh, I see.”

That time when I was biting into the ikayaki huh.



ikayaki flashbacks...

“Aah, I’m pretty hungry. I haven’t had lunch yet so I’m going to get some curry. If you haven’t had lunch yet, do you want some too?”

“No, but thank you.”

“Really?”

Wakaba-chan stood in the kitchen and began heating a pot up. It didn’t take long for the appetising smell of curry to waft over to me.

Uu... my appetite...

From the rice cooker, Wakaba-chan spooned out rice onto a dish, and then on top of that she put her curry.

Hauu, it looked so good.

“Do you want a bite too?”

A bite... Just a bite wouldn’t be too shameless, right?

“Then, perhaps just a bite, since you offered.”

“Okay~”

And so Wakaba-chan placed two people’s worth of meals onto the table.

“Itadakimasu~”

“Itadakimasu.”

Carrot and large bits of potato in a curry sauce bought from the supermarket. Just a normal household’s meal. How I missed this.

I tried a bite. Yummy!

“It is delicious.”

“Yeah~ It’s because I left the vegetables to soak in the curry overnight. Aahh, food after a day of hard work is so good!”

We smiled as we ate.

“Still, working part-time is forbidden at Suiran, so it might be best if you did not go broadcasting that.”

“Oh, you’re right. I’ll take care!”

She really had to. It would be dreadful if her enemies found out.

“By the way, thank you so much for the shoes again. You really saved me. I tried washing those stained ones and it really didn’t help after all.”

“Oh I see. Please forget about that. I was never going to wear them again any how.”

I couldn’t bring myself to throw it away, but I didn’t want to wear them either. If anything I felt thankful that she took them off my hands.

“By the way, Takamichi-san, about what happened the other day...”

It was hard to ask, but I still brought up the tracksuit incident on that rainy day.

“Was that something that Tsuruhana-san and her friends had a hand in?”

“Eh? Hmmm...”

Wakaba-chan had a troubled expression on her face.

When she went home that day she was wearing her uniform, which was soaked just like she said, but I was sure that Tsuruhana-san’s group was somehow involved. Despite some subtle investigations though, I never did get the truth.

“Takamichi-san?”

“Umm, at lunch they called me out to the 1st floor emergency exit, said a bunch of things to me, and then shut me outside. Since the door was locked I couldn’t get back in, so I ran around to the front entrance. The rain was pretty bad though, so I guess I got kinda soaked~”

“So that was what happened...”

I had thought it wouldn’t be much worse than having a bucket of water poured on her. How could they have locked her out during the freezing November rain.

“Just so you know, this is just between the two of us, okay?”

“The two of us...? Are you not going to report them? You could talk to Mizusaki-kun about this.”

“Mizusaki-kun huh~ He was pretty persistent in asking what happened too, but I didn’t want to make a huge deal out of it.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. Nothing really happened.”

Um, something *did* happen though.

“Say, Takamichi-san.”

“Yes?”

“If things ever get too bad for you, I can have a word with Tsuruhana-san, you know?”

Although honestly she had even more influence than in middle school. Unlike back then, there was no guarantee that I’d come out on top. This newcomer was giving me just a bit of trouble.

“Ehh!? It’s totally fine. I wouldn’t want to trouble you. It’s fine, fine.”

“But...”

“Are you worried about me? Thanks,” she beamed.

“If only Kaburagi-sama thought a little more about his actions...”

“Ahaha, Kaburagi-kun is a pretty funny person, isn’t he?”

“Kaburagi-*kun*?” I asked.

“Ah,” she exclaimed before covering her mouth. “Ummm, Kaburagi-sama said ‘since you use -kun with Mizusaki, do that with me too’ so...”

Kaburagi... You’re such a damned child.

“I’m sorry,” apologised Wakaba-chan, “I wasn’t thinking about how you felt.”

She must have misunderstood my frown.

“Eh? Why are you apologising? I was simply thinking about how much trouble he must be causing you.”

“Huh...? But, don’t you, you know, like him?”

“Hah? ‘Like’? Who are you talking about? Surely you cannot be speaking about Kaburagi-sama and I. Because if you are, you are *very* mistaken.”

“Really?”

“Yes!” I stressed.

This was important, so I was being extra clear.

“I see. I heard the rumours, so I was sure that...”

“Rumours are nothing to put stock in.”

“I see~” she nodded with newfound enlightenment.

“By the way, I noticed some rather gorgeous flowers in your shopfront. Could those be...”

“Ah! You noticed? Yeah, Kaburagi-kun gave us those. The other day he came here to buy cakes and...”

“Goodness!”

So he really *was* coming here! Curse that guy for conquering all the cakes before I did.

“So did he come back here, or...?”

“Oh no, he didn’t. But he has been here before a few times while we were working out the bike incident.”

Heh. I won.

Not only was I allowed into the house, I was even treated to curry.

“Umm, would you be all right with me coming to buy your cakes again?”

“Of course! You’re super welcome here!”

“And if possible, keep this a secret from Kaburagi-sama...?”

“Ahaha, then it’ll just be our little secret. Gotcha~”

After that we exchanged emails, and with newly bought cakes in hand, I hummed to myself as I made my way home.

I opened up the message I just received. Umewaka-kun sent me photos of Beatrice in a red kimono for her shichigosan. She even had chitose ame next to her. It was a proper shichigosan.



Chitose ame (千歳飴), literally “thousand year candy”, is given to children on Shichi-Go-San. Chitose ame is long, thin, red and white candy, which symbolizes healthy growth and longevity. It is given in a bag decorated with a crane and a turtle, which represent long life in Japan.

And wow, I never knew dogs wore kimono too. Whoa! Don’t tell me that that Dog Maniac made it himself? No, no, it couldn’t be.

‘Bea-tan is three years old! The kimono fits me, right?’

Yup, yup, it looks great on you.

The next photo was of my Bea-tan doll in a matching kimono.

Apparently Umewaka-kun was a broadminded man who did not distinguish between his real and adopted daughters.

Hmm, but shichigosan huh. At this rate he was definitely going to buy Beatrice a full set of dolls for Hinamatsuri.



May Dog Lover-kun and Beatrice live happily ever after!

Chapter 168

Aoi-chan messaged me.

Apparently that stubborn boy from my school was now completely avoiding her at cram school.

‘But when it was me, he wouldn’t listen no matter how many times I tried. You’re so amazing, Reika-chan! How on earth did you do it?’

Geez. I just talked to him a little, that’s all.

As for the boy, he even reformed and stopped harassing Wakaba-chan. All’s well that ends well, huh?

After all, before getting jealous of other people, you should think about improving through your own efforts first, right? Yup, yup.

Haha. Not that this was just somebody else’s problem. The term-end tests were fast approaching. If I wanted to cling to my position on the rankings board then I needed to study for my life.

Wakaba-chan was always topping that list. How on earth did she study, I wonder.

And just as I was determined to spend all my time studying, Otousama told me that I *had* to attend our family’s corporate party.

I was still a high schooler, as well as a minor to boot, so I always insisted on avoiding these business parties. This time, though, I apparently had to show my face as the chairman’s daughter. Urghh~

Okaasama was in high spirits about it. Between dragging me to beauty salons, hair salons, and dress shopping, I was finding no time for studying at all. This was bad. This was really bad.

I guess my only choice at this point was to cut down on sleep to get some studying done. Ugaaaaah!

Despite my lack of time, at school I still had to hide that I was frantically studying. I avoided my textbooks during lunch breaks and instead hung out with my friends.

“Have you heard? Apparently Kaburagi-sama visits Enjou-sama’s classroom every day.”

“I have. He speaks to Takamichi-san every time, right? What on earth is Kaburagi-sama thinking.”

“I still think it’s just a whim, but...”

“Right?”

It was almost certain that Kaburagi liked Wakaba-chan. Everybody knew this too, but they didn’t want to admit it.

Both Tsuruhana-san and the other girls who didn’t see Wakaba-chan kindly were using every opportunity to pick on her. Unfortunately it wasn’t something so obvious that Kaburagi noticed.

Maybe that was why, unlike in the manga, their relationship hadn’t progressed at all.

I suppose a clear threat like the manga’s Kisshouin Reika was necessary after all. Not to say I was even *thinking* of sticking my neck out for their romance. They would just have to work something out on their own.

Besides their lack of progress though, I got the feeling that both Kaburagi and Wakaba-chan were in quite a different relationship to their manga counterparts.

In Kimidol, Kaburagi was more mature. He was normally cool and collected, but when it came to Wakaba-chan he burned with passion; the kind of character that could tickle a maiden’s heart. How on earth he turned out as an athletics carnival-obsessed man-child instead I have no idea.

And Wakaba-chan wasn’t any different. In the manga she was more... Well, she was more normal I suppose... Never in anybody’s wildest dreams would she have stood around with her jaw hanging open, or have come to school in gumboots of all things, or gone foraging in the Suiran Forest, or, and I stress this, have been the kind of steel-skinned girl who paid her bullies *absolutely* no mind at all.

Ah, no, I mean, I *know* that the real Wakaba-chan is doing her best too, though, but I still couldn't help but think she was a completely different person to the Wakaba-chan I knew.

Really, it was throwing me all off.

The tests were coming soon so I was taking a break from my club. I couldn't avoid at least showing up at the salon though. Haah, socialising was such a pain.

Lately I noticed the President's faction discussing something with complicated expressions. It was kind of scaring me... I wasn't sure what they were talking about but I could guess it was something to do with Wakaba-chan or the Student Council.

Let sleeping dogs lie. I didn't see anything. I didn't hear anything. The only thing I'm thinking about is the dessert in front of my eyes, I swear.

Which was a charlotte aux pommes today, incidentally.



Charlotte aux pommes, or an apple charlotte cake. What Reika enjoyed was most likely a 'bowl' made from cake similar to bread or spongecake, and with layers of things such as custard, apple slices, fresh cream, mousse, apple puree, or crème bavaoise.

The faint tanginess of the apples was delicious. I actually liked apple pies better, but having a charlotte sometimes was fantastic.

While I was indulging in sweets-assisted escapism, shockingly Yukino-kun had entered the room with Enjou!

"Yukino-kun!"

"Reika-oneesan!" he beamed the moment he spotted me.

Yukino-kun ran over to me.

“Yukino-kun, why are you here today?”

“Ehehe, I asked Oniisama to bring me here to play.”

Aaah! What an angelic smile! All of the stress and weariness in my heart was disappearing!

“Yukino, make sure to greet everyone else first,” Enjou said as he placed a hand on Yukino-kun’s head from behind.

“Ah, oops,” said Yukino-kun as he turned around and bowed. “My name is Enjou Yukino. Pleased to meet you.”

With the smile of an angel, naturally.

Just that was enough to lift the mood of the salon. The girls in particular had their hearts taken by his adorable charm.

“What a wonderful day it is that Enjou-sama has brought his younger brother along! Yukino-sama, we are very pleased to meet you.”

The President sat Yukino-kun down in the middle of the sofa, and had tea and sweets brought over to the table. Despite looking troubled by the crowd of surrounding onesama, he answered each question with a smile.

Off on the side, Enjou watched Yukino-kun as he spoke to me.

“Yukino said that he wanted to see you no matter what, so I gave in and brought him here.”

“Goodness! I am very happy to hear that!”

He said he wanted to see me! I wanted to see you too, Yukino-kun!

Still, since he had been taken by the President and her friends, I would just wait here quietly until he returned.

Until then I suppose I could keep chatting with Enjou~

“Is Kaburagi-sama not with you today?”

“Apparently he had something on.”

“I see.”

‘Something’ huh. He better not have gone to Wakaba-chan’s cake shop or something.

“Masaya’s been kind of restless recently,” he said as his lips curved upwards.

Your smile is scaring me.

“I see.”

The best choice was probably just to ignore it until the subject changed.

“Yeah. And lately he keeps coming to my class for some reason. It doesn’t seem to be me though.”

Geh! And he’s telling that to *me*!?

“My, is that so.”

“It is.”

We smiled at each other. Yukino-kun, hurry up and come baaaaack! Your Oniisan is scaring meee!

By the time Yukino-kun had been released by the President’s crowd, I was exhausted from the probing. I was curious about what Kaburagi wanted, yes, but on the other hand hearing all of this from Enjou was triggering danger signs in my head. Enjou pretty much only smiled like this when he was plotting something.

Yukino-kun, who was totally unlike his two-faced older brother, told me about how he had been practising his latte art recently.

“Reika-oneesan, I heard that you’re particular about the Chinese Zodiac. I’ll try my very best so that I can finish all twelve of them!”

Who was it!? Who was it that put weird lies into Yukino-kun’s head!?

I tried to clear up the misunderstanding but Yukino-kun wasn’t listening at all.

“Right now I’m working on making the Ox.”

Drawing an ox with milk huh. Well, I suppose it’s not like it *didn’t* fit, but...

Chapter 169

On the day of the party I was told to immediately head to the hair salon after school. There, they did my hair and make-up, before leaving with Okaasama straight for the hotel where the party was being held.

Otousama and Oniisama would be headed here after work so until then I decided to just have a sandwich and study in the waiting room or something. I didn't want to get my dress creased so I'd leave it off until the last minute. Tonight I would be wearing a loose dress.

Hm, this ham sandwich was pretty good.

"Reika-san, you shouldn't eat too much. You won't be able to fit in your dress."

Okaay...

Apparently they hadn't been lying to me about this being an important party for us. Even Ririna who was just a relative was here. Her exams were coming up too. I could sympathise with her family issues cutting down on her study time. Huh, Ririna had better grades than me, didn't she. Maybe I could ask for her study methods later.

As for me, although I *was* the daughter of the chairman, not only was I still a high schooler, but I wasn't even the heir. Today I was basically just here as an extra. All I had to do was stand with my family and keep smiling.

After a while, Otousama was surrounded by other important men, while Okaasama was surrounded by ladies she was close with, so I decided to leave and wander about to see if there was somewhere with less people.

Oniisama had already been caught by the same girls who were aiming to be his bride. Godspeed, Oniisama.

I greeted people with a smile as I walked about until I came across Narutomi Akimi-san. She was the young woman I met at the fasting course.

"Akimi-san."

“Ah, Reika-san.”

A little chubby-looking, for some reason I felt really warm and relaxed around her.

“Thank you very much for inviting me tonight.”

“Thank you for attending when you must be so busy.”

She noticed me looking at the food in her hands.

“The food here is really good. I think I might have eaten too much,” she smiled in embarrassment.

“My, I am overjoyed that it is to your taste.”

I constantly told Otousama that the most important thing for these parties was the food. These corporate parties were already boring at best, so if the food wasn't even yummy what the hell was even the point.

And since I was talking about food anyhow, I made sure to tell him to make sure the company cafeteria was good too. If the employees had good food then they'd be more motivated.

That meant one step further away from our downfall! It's important to start with the small things.

“Will you not be eating, Reika-san?”

“Ehh, perhaps later...”

Yeah. Even if the food was great, it was difficult as an ojousama to eat your fill at these parties. Reapplying the gloss was a pain, and if you ate too much your stomach would bulge too. And for careless people like me it would be a disaster if I accidentally got some sauce on my dress.

Still, we'd be bringing home the food that you could take home, so I could enjoy myself later~

The scallops meunière that she was having looked great.



I think I wanted some too. I wonder if it was on the list of take-home foods.

A few men suddenly passed us.

“Of *course* the fatty is eating,” said one of them, and the others laughed along.

Akimi-san’s expression changed in a heartbeat.

What *assholes*!

I had just taken a step in their direction when Akimi-san stopped me.

“Akimi-san?”

“It’s fine, Reika-san.”

“But...”

“I *am* fat...” she smiled feebly.

What did that have to do with anything. Somebody needed to teach those insensitive assholes the fear of god!

She didn’t have to worry so much. It’s wasn’t like I was going to charge up and tell them to apologise.

Any apology I could wring out of idiots like them would just be insincere, and in the process it would turn her into a spectacle.

You had to fight fire with fire.

Instead, I was planning to flick some brown demiglace sauce on the butt of their

trousers.

Then all I had to do was shame them!

“Goodness. What in heavens is that stench...” or something like that!

You guys should just be forever known as the poop boys! Ukekekekekekekekeke!

“Please excuse me. I’m going to touch up my makeup...”

Akimi-san placed her empty dish down and she left the room as I watched her go. Once she was gone, I headed off for my journey of revenge.

When I came back from my journey, I noticed Imari-sama waving at me.

“Imari-sama!”

“Good evening, Reika-chan.”

And goodness, he was just radiating mature charm once again.

“That wine red dress you’re wearing this evening is a bit more mature than usual. I couldn’t help but stare. You were like a rose spirit.”

Hauu! An arrow of bewitchment shot through my heart!

Luckily I had high resistance from knowing him since I was little!

Imari-sama picked out a glass of non-alcoholic wine for me in the colour of my dress. Popular men were always attentive to these sort of things.

We chatted about Oniisama for a while before touching on the topic I was most interested in.

“By the way, Imari-sama, is the story about you being stabbed by a woman true?”

“Eh!? Reika-chan, how did *you* know about that!? Did you hear it from Takateru?”

“A little bird told me.”

I couldn't exactly answer 'Eavesdropping.' now could I?

"Ah boy, I never would have thought that *you* knew, Reika-chan. But calling it stabbing is just exaggerating."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. I just got into a bit of a tiff with a woman who was holding a knife, and it just happened to cut my left palm a bit. Look. See? Thanks to that the fortunes off my palm readings have completely changed."

When I looked there really was a small white scar.

Still, stabbing or not, blood really had been spilt. What kind of life was Imari-sama even living...

Oh, hang on. Could it be...?

"Come to think of it, when you were a high school student in Suiran you were in the Basketball Club, were you not?"

"Ohh! So you remembered~ That's right. I was in the Basketball Club. God, that brings back memories~"

Oh my god! So being some womaniser was actually *characteristic* of the Suiran Basketball Club!?

Suiran Academy's Boy's Basketball Club.

A.K.A. the Casanova Village, sworn enemies of the Forever Alone Village.

"Reika-san!"

While we continued to chat, Ririna came trotting over.

"Oh, Ririna."

"It's been a while, Ririna-chan."

"Gokigen'yoh, Imari-sama. Geez, it took so long to get away from Okaasama!" she

huffed as she took a drink from a server.

After having a gulp, she sighed.

“My condolences,” I offered.

“Ririna-chan, you’re wearing a bit of lily perfume today, aren’t you. It’s a perfect fit for your name, isn’t it, just like your dress tonight is a perfect fit for you.”

Oh my god! Apparently the Chief of the Casanova Village possessed a skill that allowed him to identify women’s perfumes too. No wonder he was Chief.

“Thank you...” replied Ririna as her mouth threatened to smile happily.

Her mood had taken a 180 with just a few words. One day Imari-sama was going to get stabbed for real.

Since I noticed Akimi-san coming back, I signalled her over. I hoped she was okay now. Maybe it was just an excuse for her to go cry...

She was smiling as she came over, but she was startled when she realised Imari-sama was standing next to me.

“Akimi-san. I think you may already know, but this is Momozono Imari-sama. He and my Oniisama have been friends since they were young. Imari-sama, this is Narutomi Akimi-san, whose care I have enjoyed. As for this girl, her name is Kotou Ririna, my younger cousin.”

“U-Um, please to meet you. My name is Narutomi Akimi...”

“Nice to meet you. Reika-chan never told me she had such a lovely friend. So how do you write ‘Akimi’?”

“U-, Umm, ‘aki’ as in ‘refulgent’, and ‘mi’ as in ‘beautiful’...”

“I see, I see. It suits you perfectly. Perhaps a drink then, for the lovely lady.”

Akimi-san was flustered and bright red. I wasn’t surprised.

Casanova Village Chief, I see what kind of life you live...

Ah well, as long as Akimi-san wasn't sad anymore.

But Akimi-san looked completely entranced by him. Oh dear. Akimi-san, that's a bad man, you know~

"Good evening, Kisshouin-san."

This time it was Kaburagi and Enjou. Ueehh...

Oh. In front of the three shining young men, Akimi-san had blown a fuse.

Hang in there, Akimi-san!

Chapter 170

Aside from Akimi-san, everybody here was either a student or alumni of Suiran, so there wasn't much introduction to be had.

Come to think of it, Ririna had followed Kaburagi like crazy when she entered Suiran. Then when Enjou told her off she started behaving herself.

She never did mention liking Kaburagi again, but I wondered if she had any feelings left.

I glanced over at her but... Nope, didn't seem so. All I registered was wariness. Against whom though?

More Enjou than Kaburagi it looked like. Well, maybe when he chewed her out she realised what a troublesome person he was.

Enjou had enough sense for some polite flattery for the three of us, but all Kaburagi mentioned besides the scope of the party was:

"The food's pretty good."

That's what he was praising!? Not that I wasn't okay with that, because it was honestly what I was happiest to hear.

"Well Chairman Kisshouin *is* known as 'the Gourmet President', and the 'Connoisseur Chairman' after all."

Eh!? Seriously!? I had no idea people thought of him that way! Hmph, pretty pretentious for a tanuki.

Kaburagi asked if we had eaten, but Ririna and I had only touched the drinks.

"Are you on some stupid weight loss scheme again?"

"No, that is not... I simply have not found the time to eat yet with all the guests to greet," I explained.

“I’m the same...” echoed Ririna.

Kaburagi shot us a dubious gaze.

“Hmmm... The chefs have invested so much skill and effort into these dishes and you’re alright wasting them for some diet? I hate people like that.”

The two of us flinched.

“Come on, Kisshouin-san isn’t that kind of girl, right?” Enjou stepped in, “She never leaves any of her lunch behind, and isn’t she always eating desserts at the salon?”

“Right, right,” followed Imari-sama, “To begin with, Takateru told me the reason these Kisshouin parties are known for their food is because of Reika-chan’s advice.”

“True...” Kaburagi nodded in acceptance.

Kaburagi turned his gaze to Akimi-san next.

“I-I think the temarizushi was really good,” she reported, a little frightened.

“Ahh, women *do* love that kind of thing. I’m more partial to something with a bit more meat, myself,” he chuckled.

I suppose praising the food was the right answer to him.





The two of them began chatting about which foods were good tonight.

You know, Kaburagi, I have to wonder what you mean by talking to a young woman about nothing but food. We're at a high class party here, filled with girls in their youth. Don't you have anything cooler to talk about?

As for Akimi-san, her eyes were swimming all over the place. it looked like she was hitting her limit. Do your best, Akimi-san~

"Oh yeah, by the way, Kisshouin. You've been "jogging", yeah? Can't say it seems to be working though."

"Hah...?"

Working? What did he mean 'working'? As in my stamina wasn't any better? As in I was still slow? Or did he goddamn mean that the weight loss wasn't working!?

I'll kill him! I'll definitely curse him to death! What do you mean "jogging"!? Jogging is jogging!

Despite being silent all this time, Ririna looked like she was ready to argue now and took a step forward.

"Goodness, excuse you! Reika-san might have been fat for a while, but right now her stomach is slim as anything!" she patted my tummy for emphasis.

Everybody stared at my stomach.

Ririna looked smug and triumphant, but I was feeling faint from the embarrassment.

What are you *doing* you *idiot*!! Don't you know that that kind of help just deals the

finishing blow!?

As for Akimi-san, she couldn't stomach the looks of jealousy she was getting for being around these hot guys anymore.

"Please excuse me. I'm feeling a little tipsy so I think I'll sit down for a while..."

Of course Imari-sama couldn't just let that go either.

"Are you all right?" he asked, "Let me escort you over to the chairs," he said as he gently held out a hand.

Stop ittt, Casanova Village Chief! You're going to finish her off in another sense!

Red-faced and tottering, Akimi-san was escorted off by Imari-sama.

"I'll go as well," said Ririna before chasing after Akimi-san protectively.

I suppose that was fine though. As long as Ririna was there, none of his fans would get off lightly for bullying Akimi-san.

...Hm?

Wai-, huh? Didn't this mean I was left with just *these* two? Wha-, wait up! I'll come too!

But before I had a chance to leave, this time it was Enjou's okaasama that appeared. Guwahh, my chance to get away!

"This is where you were, Shuusuke? Good evening, Reika-san. My son has been in your care."

I wasn't too familiar with her, and had only seen her a few times at graduation and the like. I had been using my age as an excuse to get out of these parties after all.

"No, no, it is always I who troubles him..." I said with an insincere smile.

Unlike Madam Kaburagi's gallant impression, this woman seemed softer and reserved. Maybe Yuiko-san was a relative of hers.

Oh, come to think of it, if Enjou's parents were here, and Enjou was here, did that

mean...?

“Ummm... Is Yukino-kun at home by himself tonight?”

I hoped he wasn't too lonely. He was too young to be staying at home alone. Back when I skipped out on the parties I still always had Oniisama around.

“Yes, but he has a minder. He should be just about done with his tutor right about now.”

“My, a home tutor...?”

That was harsh for a 1st grader.

“Yukino is always being hospitalised so he needs a way to catch up on his studies,” Enjou explained after noticing my concern.

So that was why. Oh, but come to think of it, didn't I start cram school when I was in Year 1?

“Yukino's gotten quite attached to Kisshouin-san.”

“Truly? He's always so hard to please though.”

Hard to please? Was she talking about the gentle, angelic Yukino-kun?

“I personally think Yukino-kun is a very kind and well-behaved boy,” I said earnestly.

Mrs. Enjou smiled at me.

“Why thank you. Yukino has been ill since he was little, so sometimes he can be a little demanding but please get along with him, all right?”

“Of course. I love spending time with him.”

“That damned kid has been all about imitating Shuusuke's latte art recently,” Kaburagi suddenly added, “The last time I went over to Shuusuke's that kid had already managed a heart, you know. He said that he wanted to make one for you, so I told him ‘Kisshouin would be happier to get the Chinese Zodiac’.”

Kaburagi, the one spouting weird lies into Yukino-kun's head was *youuu*!?

“Chinese Zodiac...? Speaking of which, recently my son *has* been practising an ox... That was thanks to *you*, Reika-san...?”

“The kid told me that he’d mastered the rat already. Isn’t that great, Kisshouin?”

Oh *god*, please just stop!

You’re giving his mum the wrong idea!

You’re wrong, Mrs. Enjou! I’m absolutely not some kind of Chinese Zodiac-obsessed weirdo! Please don’t think of me as some bad influence! I’m not some strange woman!

While all this was happening, Enjou was smiling without a care. Do something about your best friend already! And fix this misunderstanding with your mum!

That was when Mrs. Kaburagi came over. At some point this situation had turned into a total Away Game for me. I was surrounded by enemies in every direction. Imari-sama, Akimi-san, Ririna, comeee baaaack~!

But my telepathy failed to activate, and Mrs. Kaburagi ended up inviting me to some Christmas party.

“I already have some plans with friends...” I desperately turned her down.

Please don’t ask me what friends~! It was a total lie! Aah, my stomach... I’m done for...

In the end it was Oniisama who saved me. It was your sixth sense as a sibling wasn’t it, Oniisama! In the end the only one I could rely on was Oniisama wasn’t it!

The temarizushi was part of what we took home later.

With one hand I ate them, and with the other I stabbed the black panther doll I was making with Kaburagi in mind.

A pox, a pox, a pox, a pox, a pox...

An email came from Akimi-san.

‘A wallflower like me got to experience such a wonderful dream...’

It's fine that you enjoyed it, but Imari-sama is the only person you can't fall for, Akimi-san!

Chapter 171

Hans Axel von Fersen (4 September 1755 – 20 June 1810) was a Swedish count, Marshal of the Realm of Sweden, a General of Horse in the Royal Swedish Army, one of the Lords of the Realm, aide-de-camp to Rochambeau in the American Revolutionary War, diplomat and statesman, and a friend of Queen Marie-Antoinette of France. He died at the hands of a Stockholm lynch mob.

Charles-Henri Sanson, full title Chevalier Charles-Henri Sanson de Longval (15 February 1739 – 4 July 1806) was the royal executioner of France during the reign of King Louis XVI, and High Executioner of the First French Republic. He administered capital punishment in the city of Paris for over forty years, and by his own hand executed nearly 3,000 people, including the King himself.

Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just (25 August 1767 – 28 July 1794) was a military and political leader during the French Revolution. He spearheaded the movement to execute King Louis XVI and later drafted the radical French Constitution of 1793. He became a close friend of Maximilien Robespierre, and served with him as one of the commissioners of the powerful Committee of Public Safety.

Maximilien François Marie Isidore de Robespierre (6 May 1758 – 28 July 1794) was a French lawyer and politician. He is perhaps best known for his role in the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, a period during the French Revolution characterised by mass executions.

Anyhow, what I took away from that last party was that there were no signs of our family being destroyed at this point.

Everyone from our company screamed 'Elite!' and 'Capable!'. Not only were they all quite accomplished at work, but their expressions seemed positive too.

Thanks to my constant reminders Otousama wasn't doing anything dishonest, and best of all Oniisama was working there!

I could count on Oniisama to stop Otousama from trying to commit fraud or attempt

any hostile takeovers.

And we had the secretary Sasajima-san too.

Okaasama might have been quite a spender, but it wasn't so much that our family was in danger, and I liked to think that I was spending modestly too.

As for our destroyers from the manga, while we weren't particularly close to the Kaburagi family, neither were we on bad terms. At the very least they didn't have a reason to destroy us. Probably.

At this rate I didn't think I'd end up needing to go to another university. Suiran University probably wouldn't be a problem. Because geez, if it wasn't for the school fees I *reaaally* wanted to go to Suiran.

I was humming thoughtfully to myself with a pillow in hand as I sat in the living room after my dinner and bath.

Oniisama came back from work and asked what I was doing.

"Hmmm, I suppose I am wondering about what I want to do in the future."

"Future? You weren't planning on going to Suiran's university?"

"Well that *would* be ideal but..."

Oniisama slackened his tie as he took a seat next to me.

"Then what's the problem? Are the grade requirements for your major too high?"

"No, I am not even sure what faculty I want to enter yet. I suppose I was just kind of wondering about the school fees?"

"School fees?"

Oniisama looked at me strangely. Well, of course he did. Why would a daughter of the *Kisshouin* family have to worry about paying her school fees.

"For example, if our family suddenly became bankrupt... I was wondering if I could afford them in that case..."

“Bankrupt? You always have the most negative daydreams, don’t you, Reika. You’ve been like this since you were a kid. Is there some reason, or?”

“Not exactly...”

I couldn’t exactly say ‘I read a manga in my last life, Oniisama’. He’d think I was mental.

I sat in silence as Oniisama sighed, placing a hand on my head.

“You know, Reika, I don’t know why you’re so worried about that, but both our company and our family are doing just fine. And even if something did happen to our family, I at least have enough money to pay for one sister’s tuition fees. If you have a university you want to go to, then just go. Alright?”

His reassuring smile cleared away my worries. Of course! I had Oniisama, didn’t I. Of course everything was going to be alright. I wasn’t alone.

“You should rely on your family more, Reika.”

Yeah. Thank you.

This morning Kaburagi visited Wakaba-chan’s class, as was the norm.

Although Wakaba-chan referred to him as ‘Kaburagi-sama’ now, when speaking to him directly she used ‘Kaburagi-kun’ as he instructed.

Even though he basically forced her into it, people were still unhappy about it.

In the salon the President was coldly listening to her daily report on Takamichi Wakaba.

The use of ‘Kaburagi-kun’ by an ordinary student like Wakaba-chan was outrageous to her group.

A number of the Suiran supremacists had already warned her to ‘know her place’ but since she told them that it was at Kaburagi’s instruction, none of them could escalate further.

Which of course just worsened their ire of her.

The President's group were gathered in their corner, as usual, whispering about something or other.

Since I had tests to study for I left the salon early today and made my way to the car park. On the way I happened to meet Kaburagi.

"Gokigen'yoh, Kaburagi-sama. Are you leaving for the day?"

"Yeah."

I bet he was secretly studying away to keep his ranking.

"Thank you finding the time to come to our humble party, the other night."

"No, thanks for inviting me. I had fun."

Whoa! Of all people, *Kaburagi* was being polite to me!

Kaburagi suddenly glanced into the distance. At the end of his gaze was who seemed to be Wakaba-chan.

He stood there watching until the figure left.

"Kaburagi-sama..."

"Hm?" he continued staring in that direction.

"Were you aware that a great many people are jealous because of all the attention you pay to Takamichi-san?"

"Eh?"

He turned to face me but I bade him farewell and got into my car.

I somehow managed to finish the end-of-term tests. They were always hard because of how much more content you had to study for than the mid-terms.

I didn't have much in the way of memory storage, so whenever I remembered something new it just pushed out what I studied earlier. Wasn't there some way of fixing this?

During the test there was something related to the test written on Wakaba-chan's desk. Thankfully she realised and notified the teacher beforehand.

If she hadn't she might have been accused of cheating.

I hoped the scare didn't affect her performance...

My Vice President at the Handicrafts Club came to my class.

"Um, Reika-sama. Club Activities will be recommencing today. Will you be attending?"

I was super happy that she was here to invite me, but I already had *that* planned for today.

"I am sorry. Today I must head to the Pivoine salon no matter what. If I can find the time afterwards, I would certainly like to head to the club, but..."

The President of the Pivoine had asked me to come to the salon after the term-end exams. I didn't want to be... I had a bad feeling about this...

"I see. Well, we've all just finished our exams, so I don't think many people will be coming today anyhow. Please don't push yourself and just head home."

"I see. Thank you."

If I had my way then I'd be heading to the Handicrafts Club too. It was getting cold, so I was thinking about knitting myself a haramaki belly warmer for winter.



But I couldn't exactly refuse the invitation of the President of all people.

I trudged my way there with a heavy heart, and when I arrived at the salon I was met

by the smiles of the President and her friends.

“Sorry for calling you here so soon after your exams, Reika-sama.”

“No, please do not be. Was there something you wished to speak about?”

“Yes, we did. Right, everybody?”

Everyone nodded.

“The truth is that we would like you to be the next President of the Pivoine.”

“Eh!? Me!?”

Me!? That’s impossible!

To begin with, why *me!?* The President needed the power to control these people!

How on earth could I even go about controlling the likes of Enjou and Kaburagi.
Particularly Kaburagi!

If there was somebody who continually undermined the words of the leader, pretty soon everybody would follow.

And if the non-members saw that nobody was listening to me they’d think of me as an easy mark as well. And then at the end they’d stage a revolution! Oh no, I’d be headed for the guillotine...

If I was the Rococo Queen then that made Fellow Stalking Horse Robespierre!

Eh!? Then did that make Wakaba-chan Saint-Just!?

Noooooooooooooooooooo! Save meee, Ferseeen!

“Reika-sama?”

Whoa! Talk about losing a grip on reality!

“I am unsure that I am suited for...”

“Everything will be fine! We will persuade younger members to see things our way. The Pivoine won’t lose to the likes of the Student Council!”

No, no, I don’t want to fight it out with the Student Council at all. Don’t tell me she was going to turn me into a puppet President and control the Pivoine after graduation?

“Please, Reika-sama, for the good of the Pivoine.”

Impossible... I couldn’t see any future in it except for isolation. Sanson the Executioner was already beckoning for me...

Oh dear, I think my hair was going to turn white from the stress...

‘Since the exams are done, wanna come over and hang?’ came the message from Aoi-chan.

I *super* do!

You’re the only one I can voice my complaints to, Aoi-chaaan~!

Chapter 172

When I met up with Aoi-chan that weekend I started ranting about being asked to become the Pivoine's president.

"In other words you don't want to become the president of that group?"

"Mmn. Absolutely not. It's too heavy. Class president is about as much responsibility as I can handle."

"I see... Then is there anybody else suitable?"

In my opinion it should have been Kaburagi as the most influential member. If not then Enjou maybe.

But Kaburagi would never agree to something so troublesome. I couldn't see him being interested in the power over the Pivoine either.

But obviously Youko-sama and co. knew all of this or they wouldn't have come to me to begin with, huh...

"I can only think of two others but they'd never accept..."

I suppose there was at least the possibility that Enjou would accept if he was asked, but I didn't have high hopes for it.

"Is the workload really that bad?"

"I don't think the work would be all that bad..."

The work for the Summer Party and other events were all outsourced, and the Pivoine's concierge did all of the clerical work.

Compared to the Student Council President, you could say that the President of the Pivoine did basically nothing. I think that was why the role wasn't passed on until December, despite the exams.

“But you still don’t want it?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s rough,” she consoled me when my phone, which I had left in silent, began to vibrate in my bag.

“Oh? Aren’t you going to get that, Reika-chan?”

“Sorry. Could I?”

“Of course!”

The sender field read Sakura-chan.

It turned out to be an invitation to hang out since she was free right now.

Damned Sakura.

Did she think I just sat around at home every weekend?

“A friend of mine was inviting me to hang out.”

“Oh okay. No problems?”

“Yeah.”

I texted her back and said that I was already with another friend so I couldn’t.

Hehe, even *I* have friends to hang with on a weekend, you know.

“She’s from Yurinomiya. We met while we were in primary and for a while we went to the same cram school. Even though she looks like a perfect Japanese doll, her personality is actually pretty funny.”

“Huh~ Then why don’t you invite her here?”

“Eh!? Is that okay!?”

“Yeah. I’m fine with it.”

Being fine with a stranger coming along would have been unimaginable in primary school, given that she was shy enough to run from me.

Huh.

Or was it just that I was that scary back then?

Haha, no way, right?

“Well then, I guess I’ll ask her.”

Actually it was Sakura-chan who was liable to turn this down. After all, she was always playing the sweet girl with other people.

Or so I thought, until her next message arrived.

‘I’m already close by. Be there soon.’

Ehh!? Everyone was so sociable today!

“She’s coming,” I said.

“Oh okay,” she smiled. “Does she know where the place is?”

Wow, so she really didn’t care...

Sakura-chan wasn’t lying about being close-by. She was there right away.

“Hi, I’m Yorino Aoi.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Fukioka Sakurako.”

I had been worried that it would be awkward, but the two of them really hit it off. Mostly with love-talk.

“So you’re going out with a guy from your school, Aoi-chan. That’s sooo nice.”

“But don’t you have a boyfriend in Suiran, Sakurako-chan?”

“We’re not officially dating yet though. I just need to give him a bit of a push.”

I had heard from Sakura-chan that Akizawa-kun's attitude had changed after the School Festival. Apparently he finally realised his feelings for her after what happened with Dite.

Well done, Dite.

And speaking of Dite he hadn't given up on Sakura-chan yet.

Sometimes he spoke to me about his passionate feelings for Sakura-chan, and even poured those feelings into violin CDs that I ended up having to listen to.

Yet another troublesome thing in my life.

"Please help me, Kisshouin-kun!" he'd say each time, but since there was no way *Sakura-chan* would ever give up on Akizawa-kun, I couldn't do anything except advise him to search for a new love.

And getting rid of that afro would be a great first step.

"So I've been making him one lunch a week, you see?" said Aoi-chan, "But compared to the lunches I actually put effort into, it was only when it was a simple ginger pork on rice did he really enjoy it. It was sooo depressing."

"I know what you mean! I spend so much time making some of these things for Takumi but he prefers the karaage of all things. It's really discouraging. I make lunch for his track and field championships but each time he just keeps asking for karaage, karaage, like a broken record. Why do I even bother?"

"Aah, I know how you feel~ Fried food is a winner with them, isn't it. My boyfriend loves fried prawns too."

"Mmn. Making anything else feels like a waste of effort. But then Takumi always says 'You make the best karaage, Sakurako' so I can't help but keep making it for him, you know~?"

"Ah. So you've gone back to praising him?"

"Uhuhu~"

Sakura-chan and Aoi-chan continued talking about what they were making their

boyfriends.

“What did you make recently?”

“Hmm, deep-fried pacific saury? He liked that it was salty and sweet. Oh, and some cabbage rolls.”

“Cabbage rolls are a good choice. Made in broth though? Or is it tomato sauce?”

“My family uses broth, but tomato sauce is nice too.”

“And if you use dried parsley with the tomato sauce the colour is fantastic.”

“Mhm, mhm.”

I was being left out.

The two of them could cook as though it was natural...

I could barely make desserts. For some reason it was making me anxious. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to learn, for my future boyfriend...

“So what are you doing for Christmas?”

“My school is Catholic so we'll be busy with a bazaar, and a musical performance with handbells at the church. Every year we have a Christmas party at Takumi's though, so that's what I'll be doing in the evening.”

As expected of family friends. It seemed that each year Sakura-chan roasted turkey with his mum and older sister.

Given that she was his childhood friend, and his mother already doted on Sakura-chan like her own, Akizawa-kun was probably going to have to just accept his fate.

“I want to see the Christmas lights too.”

“That sounds nice~ I've thought about going myself, but maybe before the day since it's going to be packed.”

“That was my plan too. Where are you going, anyhow?”

And then they began happily talking about their Christmas plans.

I sat there silently and sipped on my tea.

Tsk. What 'Christmas'.

A blizzard ought to just come in and clog up the traffic.

Through Enjou, Yukino-kun told me that he wanted to show off the results of his latte art training, so I happily headed to the Petit Pivoine.

When I arrived I was greeted by little angels.

"Reika-oneesan, quickly sit down!" guided Yukino-kun.

I did as he said, and he began demonstrating his latte art skills.

"Yukino-kun, will you make some for us too?" asked Mao-chan.

"Sure."

And so after that he drew three hearts in a row.

For some reason there was a beautifully drawn ox sitting in front of me instead.

Huh. Was this a holstein?

"You did a splendid job drawing this cow."

"Ehehe, I tried really hard," he smiled happily.

I took a picture of it before helping myself.

Mn, yummy.

"Oh yeah, Reika-oneesan, thank you for the cake the other day. The little pistachio cake was delicious."

"Oh? I am happy to hear that."

Since Yukino-kun had to stay at home during the party the other day, I had Enjou carry a set of the hotel's mini cakes home for him.

When I was small Oniisama would always bring cakes and desserts back from the parties for me, so I was just following his lead.

"What are you doing for Christmas, Reika-oneesan?"

"Me? Oh, I have a few things planned with some friends of mine..."

I unconsciously put on airs since Yukino-kun asked.

"Ehhh!?" exclaimed Mao-chan, "But I wanted you to come to *my* Christmas party, Reika-oneesama! You're dropping in too, right, Yukino-kun?"

"Yes," he nodded.

Ehh!? Really!?

Why did I have to satisfy my stupid pride...

Thanks to that I wasted my own chance at spending Christmas with cute little angels! Reika, you idiot!

I couldn't just take back my words now either...

Mao-chan suggested exchanging presents and they began to talk about their plans for the party.

Uuu, I wanted to come too.

Today was the day of the term-end exam results.

With my face beaming the usual 'I don't really care about my ranking at all~' I made my way to the board, only to find that I really wasn't in the top 30.

Guoooh!!

I just had no luck recently.

Maybe the curse I set on Kaburagi's panther totem had come back to roost...



Cabbage roll in broth



Cabbage roll in tomato sauce

Chapter 173

Ever since Oniisama told me not to worry about school fees I felt so relaxed~

I suppose that was why I was slacking off lately. Having to go to that party hadn't helped.

I still like to think that I studied properly though.

Part of the reason I didn't make it onto the ranking board was probably that some people were beginning to study properly now. It was coming to the point where we had to start thinking about our futures.

Internal students like me were at least guaranteed a university entrance, but that wasn't to say that getting into the popular courses would be easy.

Aaah~ If I didn't get my act together my grades were probably going to keep slipping...

Anyway, it was Kaburagi in 1st place and Enjou in 2nd this time.

They really were something else.

Even though they were both at the party, unlike a certain somebody their grades hadn't dropped at all.

I liked to think it was because their mothers hadn't dragged them around to beauty salons and hairdressers.

Yeah, that's what I'm going with.

As for Wakaba-chan whose bullying had escalated to being framed as a cheater, she was at 4th place having been beaten out by Fellow Stalking Horse.

4th place after all that was amazing. I wished she could share some of those smarts with me.

Even though she was the smartest girl in the grade you'd never know from looking at

her. As usual she was standing around with her mouth hanging open, and hair on the back of her head was sticking this way and that.

Please be a bit more careful, Wakaba-chan! There are so many things to tease you on!

“Studies are all that ugly bitch has, after all.”

“She studies to the point that she doesn’t care about how she looks anymore.”

“Can you even call that a girl~?”

Despite people badmouthing her from right behind, Wakaba-chan paid them no heed at all.

No doubt she was daydreaming about the lunch she’d be treating herself to.

“Takamichi.”

“Ah, Mizusaki-kun.”

The girls who had been badmouthing her scattered at Fellow Stalking Horse’s arrival.

“Geez, I lost to you this time.”

“You’re still 4th. And I barely beat you this time. Not that I won’t be studying hard to do this again though.”

“Yeah. Do your best.”

“You still have room to say that?”

“Ahaha.”

The two of them seemed to be getting along quite well. Was it because they were both in the Student Council?

And Wakaba-chan’s attitude was relaxed in a way that she wasn’t during interactions with Kaburagi.

Uwah, the faces of the Prime Arima fans were kinda terrifying right now.

The squeals of girls heralded Kaburagi and Enjou.

Perhaps because the rings of girls had already informed them but they simply glanced at the top of the board and that was it.

What the hell. Be a little more glad about this. I wasn't even on the list.

The two of them were about to head back when Kaburagi caught sight of Wakaba-chan and stopped.

"...Sup."

"Ah, congratulations on 1st place."

"Isn't it a given?"

"Aah."

His expression had softened a bit. I guess he was happy to see her in the morning.

Given the difference in treatment with other girls I could see why everyone was so jealous of her.

As Wakaba-chan stood with her back to the board, Fellow Stalking Horse stood to her side.

In front of her stood Kaburagi.

And a little distance behind him was Enjou.

One girl, surrounded by the three boys who were arguably the most popular in the entirety of the high school section. And that girl was Wakaba-chan.

Wasn't this kind of bad...?

Look! See! People from the President's group were glaring at them right now!

Wakaba-chaaan, there's less than a month left until graduation. Pleaaase don't get in trouble until then.

Of *course* she was immediately surrounded in the locker room after gym class.

“You’re really getting ahead of yourself!”

“You weren’t fine with just Kaburagi-sama and Enjou-sama but even had to force Mizusaki-kun to wait on you!?”

“You suuure are good at sucking up to boys~”

By the time I heard about this Wakaba-chan was already surrounded by a ring of girls. And since no boys were here to see, none of them were holding back.

“Is it true that you came here as a gold digger?”

“With that face? Are you joking?”

“But she’s not doing too bad at deceiving Kaburagi-sama, is she~ Just as planned, right?”

Wakaba-chan didn’t say anything in return. She should have.

Then again it would have just made things worse.

Wakaba-chan didn’t seem to mind, but it was hurting me to watch.

“Your family owns a cake shop, I hear.”

That got a twitch out of her.

The girls seemed to notice because they smiled nastily and picked that to attack.

“Gosh. It must be a famous pâtisserie, I’m sure.”

“Why, the pâtissier has probably competed in the La Coupe du Monde de la Pâtisserie.”

“Right? There’s no way Suiran would let in a child from some tiny local bakery after all.”

“I heard it was a pretty cheap place. I wonder what they use as ingredients.”

That crossed the line. How could they talk about her parents like that!

Wakaba-chan's expression had changed. She loved her family after all.

They were so cruel! I couldn't watch any longer!

"I enjoyed it. Cake from Takamichi-san's store."

"Reika-sama!"

I entered their little ring.

"Eh, umm, Reika-sama..."

"It was a soft and pleasant flavour. It only took one taste to make me a fan. Both the strawberry shortcake and cream puffs were delicious. When I bought some to bring home with me, Oniisama loved them too. Apparently he liked the Swiss rolls the most. But perhaps the two of us simply have no taste. According to you girls."

I leveled a harsh gaze over the girls who had been laughing at her.

Each of them hung their heads as I looked at them.

Some of them had a crush on Oniisama while he was enrolled here, and some others had cousins or older sisters aiming for him.

Protect me with your powers, Oniisama!

"Reika-sama and Takateru-sama..." muttered one.

"We didn't mean..."

"Didn't mean what?" I questioned.

The changing room was dead silent.

"I am not fond of that way of doing things."

The group of girls began to disperse.

As my heart went crazy in my chest I left as well, somehow managing to cover up the shaking in my legs.

Later on Serika-chan and the others asked why I had been to Wakaba-chan's place, so I just said that I had entered the place on a whim only to find out it was Wakaba-chan's.

Aahh, what was I going to do about this if the President heard...

That night Wakaba-chan messaged me for the first time.

'I'm going to especially make you a Yule Log as thanks!'

Chapter 174

“Yesterday, that Takamichi Wakaba girl caused problems again, I see.”

The President stopped to enjoy a sip of tea.

“Because of that one girl the entire school has been thrown into chaos and ill-discipline. Don’t you all agree?”

Her allies agreed and their dislike of Wakaba-chan showed in their expressions.

I just smiled and stayed silent.

Since yesterday I had been terrified that she would call me out on defending Wakaba-chan and I could tell the moment was here.

The moment I arrived in the salon after school today, the President called me over for some tea.

My heart hadn’t stopped thumping since. This wasn’t going to be a problem was it?

There was an urban myth that mammals were born with a set number of heartbeats. I hoped I wasn’t using mine up.

“What do you think, Reika-sama?”

I knew it!

“Not much, but I...”

“From what I hear, you stopped a group of girls from confronting Takamichi-san?”

Ueegghh, there were little waves in my teacup from the shaking...

Come on, Reika! You’re an actress right now!

“Yes. I was told that there was a disturbance so I went to investigate, only to hear

something that I could not accept and, well..."

"My..."

"Even if Takamichi-san herself has problems, I cannot agree with insulting her family as well. It would hurt me deeply if anybody disparaged my own family..." I said as I placed a hand to my chest and tried my best to look sad.

The people around began to sympathise with me, because "Everybody knows how close Reika-sama is with her family..."

"You're a kind person, so no wonder you couldn't overlook that. Insulting family is certainly classless."

"Yes..."

"But if we examine the root cause, this was all because Takamichi-san earned the enmity of so many people by failing to understand propriety. If it wasn't for her lack of consideration, Reika-sama would never have had to have been hurt."

"Eh..."

Everybody voiced their agreement.

"Poor Reika-sama."

"Why did Reika-sama have to suffer for a girl like that?"

"Without even knowing how it ends up hurting Reika-sama, Takamichi Wakaba continues to have the Student Council President wait on her hand and foot. How very convenient for her."

"With the way the Student Council have been spoilt it's little wonder that that girl has been getting ahead of herself," complained one of the boys.

"Very true," agreed the President. "Because the current Student Council has been pushing their luck, that girl has felt no reason to reform."

The President took my hands into hers.

“Reika-sama. I know full well how kind you are. But kindness is not enough for the President of the Pivoine. There are times when we must be harsh as well. If not, the Student Council will only grow more impudent.”

“No, but as I mentioned earlier, I am not capable enough to...”

“The current Student Council is truly aggravating. It appears that they even harbour ambitions of supplanting the Pivoine.”

“Umm...”

After that the conversation turned to their latest skirmish with the Student Council.

Aahh, so they still hadn’t given up on making me president...

I quietly left my seat and headed for my usual sofa by the wall.

I suppose I can at least consider having dealt with the repercussions of yesterday?
Ahhh...

Around the time that I was on my second cup of tea, Kaburagi and Enjou finally came along.

They had no idea about how other people suffered!

Perhaps my displeasure was oozing from my body because Enjou spoke to me.

“What’s wrong, Kisshouin-san? You seem worn out today.”

I am!

“The end of the year is a busy time.”

Recently it was one worry after another.

I was actually checking for white hairs you know.

Well, given all the scalp massages I was getting from both the beauty salon and myself, I think it was in pretty good shape though!

On days like this I just wanted to head to my club and begin knitting already. You can really lose yourself in knitting, after all.

I bade the two of them goodbye and left the salon.

The Handicrafts Club was heaven!

Everyone happily knitted as we discussed the tea party on the last day of club activities for the year.

Since I was only a (provisional) member last year I didn't get to participate, but this year I could boldly do so. Wahh, so happy.

"When I mentioned the tea party to Kotou-san she said she wanted to join in."

"My, my, that would simply not do, Minami-kun. Tell her that if she wants to participate then she should join the club."

Geez, that Ririna is so spoilt. Even a (provisional) member like me wasn't allowed to. The road to the end-of-year tea party is that tough, you know. Definitely not a party that just any outsider can join in on.

"Are you making a neck warmer, Reika-sama?"

"Uhuhu, that is a *secret*."

I couldn't admit that it was meant to be a belly warmer yet... If I screwed it up, I could always give it to the tanuki. A nice, cute pink one for him!

After the conversation between Sakura-chan and Aoi-chan the other day, I was starting to feel anxious about cooking.

Were girls just *supposed* to know? If so, that was bad news for me...

I casually asked the girls in my group, and a lot of them couldn't cook either. Plenty of them had employees to do that after all.

It wasn't enough to set me at ease though. I couldn't say for certain that I'd never have to cook, after all. Like what if there was some day when I had to cook for a boy I liked!?

In the past I tried teaching myself through experiments a few times, but I got bored straight away. Maybe learning under an expert was the right idea after all?

While I was thinking about it, I suddenly thought of Akimi-san. I *think* she might have said something about becoming a cooking teacher?

Just between you and me, I actually don't know a whole lot about cooking. I would probably have to start with the basics of the basics.

I had the feeling that Akimi-san would be a gentle teacher to a clumsy person like me.

In the end I sent her a message about it. Ooh, I hoped that she'd say okay.

She immediately replied that as long as I was fine with her. She even asked me to try her cooking to see if I was okay with her sense of taste first. Yaaay!

Now even I was going to be able to cook for my future boyfriend! Wait for me, my yet unknown love!

Since it wasn't set in stone yet, I only told Oniisama that I might be learning how to cook. He gave me a strange look. Why? I even told him that I'd be giving him the most of my cooking.

For some reason Kaburagi gave me a book on acupoints. It was tagged on the pages for "acupoints good for lessening fatigue".

What the heck.

Hmmmm, now where's the acupoint for smaller stomachs...

Chapter 175

The book on acupoints I got from Kaburagi was pretty interesting. The human body *suure* had a lot of acupoints.

For swelling and water weight was the Water Separation Shuifen Point on your tummy, apparently. I gave it a press. Hmmmmm. Was this working?

For leg fatigue and swelling there was the Mountain Support Chengshan Point in the middle of the calf.

Whoa! That hurt! I think it was working!

I was using the rounded end of a pen to push one of the nerves on the sole of my foot. Owowowow...

I had gotten into acupoints so much that the next day I went out and bought some of the stick-on moxibustion kits. I had always been a little curious about this, after all~

Since I was worried about scarring I tried the sole of my foot first.

First was the Gushing Spring Yongquan Point. Whoaa! Hot! It hurt, but it felt like it was working! So this stuff was real!?

When it was done, the skin underneath had gone red. Best not to do this with sensitive or visible skin then.

It wasn't all that comfortable laying face down, so I changed from the bottom of my feet to my palms. Umm, the one in the palm of your hand was the Toil Palace Laogong Point, right? Got it.

It felt pretty good just pressing on the Fish Border Yuji Point at the base of the thumb. One for there too.

Hmm, and maybe all my fingertips...

While I waited for them to burn with my hands palm up, I stimulated the acupoints on

my feet with the foot massager I bought earlier.

It reaaally hurt the arch of my foot! But it was good for me!

I heard a knock on my door.

“Reika, mind if we talk?” asked Oniisama from outside.

I asked him to come in, since I could hardly get the door with moxa on every finger.

When he came in, Oniisama was wide-eyed and speechless.

“I apologise for my appearance, Oniisama. How about you join me?” I offered as I stepped on my foot massager.



Also known as ‘green bamboo’ since apparently that’s what they were before.

“Reika, when work calms down a bit, how about we go and eat somewhere? If you’re worried or something, you can talk to me about it...”

“Wah! Thank you, Oniisama.”

Eating out with Oniisama, huh. Then until then, I needed to keep up with the stomach acupoint.

At first I thought this was ridiculous, but now I was so glad I got this book~

Kuuh~! I can feel it working!

It was finally here; the day of the tea party where the 2nd and 3rd year Pivoine members discussed the next president.

It was discussion mostly in name of course; usually the candidate was already chosen

in advance, meaning that the President simply had to announce who it was.

Aah, in the end I failed to refuse... My stomach felt like it had a weight in it.

Could I spend my next year peacefully, do you think? Probably not, huh.

I thought about asking Enjou to do it just in case, but he avoided giving a straight answer with a smile, and even if he did accept I could only see trouble for myself.

Owing a favour to that guy was like owing money to a loan shark.

But I was resigned now. If ever there was some problem that I couldn't deal with myself, I was resolved to go crying to Oniisama.

Maybe even Imari-sama could help me.

With Oniisama's smarts, and Imari-sama's way with women, there weren't many problems that we couldn't resolve.

To calm myself down, I pressed on the acupoints on hand.

"Well then, is anybody interested in becoming a candidate for the next president?" began Youko-sama after a round of pleasantries.

Naturally my hands weren't raised. Even I wouldn't nominate myself...

"If there isn't, then I nominate-"

"I'll do it," somebody interrupted.

To everyone's shock, it was the Emperor, Kaburagi Masaya himself.

"Eh...?"

"Kaburagi-sama...?"

I was shocked as well, of course.

Kaburagi trying for the next president!?

Impossible. This was Kaburagi!

He obviously had no interest in working as the president at all!

No freaking way! What the hell was happening!?

“Am I not good enough?” he lorded over us, sending the room into a panic.

“So you’ll be willing to undertake the position, Kaburagi-sama?”

“We could not wish for somebody better, Kaburagi-sama, but...”

“I don’t think any of us think that you’re unsuitable, Kaburagi-sama, but...”

But was he serious?

That was what everybody was asking in their heads.

Starting with Youko-sama, a huge slew of people would have loved Kaburagi as the next president, but they gave up from the start because they knew he would never accept. At least that’s what we thought.

“In other words there are no objections to I, Kaburagi Masaya, as the next President of the Pivoine?”

Everyone nodded in assent.

“I see. Then that’s that,” he said before arrogantly relaxing back into the sofa with tea in hand.

Once the discussions were done, Youko-sama came over to me apologetically.

“Reika-sama, I’m truly sorry about this. I hadn’t even considered that Kaburagi-sama would be interested, and...”

“No, I was shocked as well. But in fact, this is a great weight off my mind.”

“You’re right. After all, Kaburagi-sama is the face of Suiran itself, not just our Pivoine. With Kaburagi-sama as the next president, the likes of Mizusaki Arima’s Student Council are as good as rabble.”

“Truly.”

“A Pivoine led by Kaburagi-sama, with you and Enjou-sama supporting him. How wonderful... Isn’t it, Reika-sama? Hohoho,” she laughed happily.

I still wasn’t quite sure what happened, but at least I got out of being president. I wouldn’t have to worry about white hairs now.

Hell yeah! After a storm comes a calm, damnit! Ah, maybe that was the wrong phrase?

Good things come to those who wait? Maybe that wasn’t it either.

Well who cares! Whoooo!

I left the room feeling so euphoric I could skip. Of course, Kaburagi had to stop me.

Eh? What is it now?

Don’t tell me you don’t wanna do it after all? Well too late, buddy!

“Can I help you...?”

“Were you planning on being president?”

“Eh?”

Why was he asking *that*? Ohh, did he overhear my chat with Youko-sama?

“If there was nobody else then they planned to give it to me, but I myself had no interest. It was a responsibility that I hoped somebody else would take up.”

“I see. Good.”

Huh?

“Masaya was worried he had taken it from you,” explained Enjou who was standing next to him.

Oh, so that was it.

"I had absolutely no aspirations towards the position of president, so please be at ease. I wish you luck as our next president."

"Yeah."

Oh, and I almost forgot.

"And Kaburagi-sama, the book you gave me was very interesting. Thank you very much for it. Well then, gokigen'yoh."

My worries were gone now.

Maybe I'd try some more moxibustion tonight.

I wonder why he suddenly decided to be the next president though.

Ah well, whatever.

After I woke up early that morning, I had my morning bath. Haah, so warm.

Without washing my hair in the morning it was hard to turn my bed hair into my perfect curls after all.

After getting out of the bath, I stood in front of the mirror for some skin care.

Couldn't be stingy with the facial lotion.

Huh.

"Waaaaaaaahhhh!!"

Gone! My eyebrow was gone!

I gripped the mirror in both hands and stared at my eyebrow. Gone...

Where my right eyebrow should have been was instead just the two ends of it. An eyebrow missing almost the entirety of its middle...

When I looked at my left eyebrow to compare, it was missing a part of it as well. My face looked so weird right now...

No, no, it wasn't the time for this morbid fascination.

Where the heck had my right eyebrow gone!? And since when!?

I had to do something about this.

At times like this, the most reliable one was...

"Okaaaasamaaaa!"

I covered my eyebrows with one hand and ran for her.

When she saw what had happened to them she screamed as well.

"Reika-san, what have you done to yourself!?"

"I have no idea, Okaasama! When I saw myself in the mirror just now they were already like this!"

"So you didn't shave them off by mistake?"

"No! Absolutely not. And why would I ever shave off just the middle!?"

"True... Then why... Reika-san, could it be that you plucked them off yourself during your sleep?"

"I doubt that I have the dexterity for that in my sleep."

"True."

"What do I do, Okaasamaaaa!"

"Well, we'll have you take school off for today. Okaasama will take you to the hospital."

I nodded tearily.

Uooohnnhoo! I didn't want to go outside with this stupid looking face! What the heck happened to you, eyebrow!? An insect bite!?

Otousama and Oniisama came to see what the fuss was about, but I didn't want them

to see! Especially never Oniisama!

At the hospital I was diagnosed with spot baldness.

Apparently it wasn't limited to the hair on your scalp. I was careless.

"It's actually quite common. With men it can happen with their facial hair too."

I see. My mind had the toughness of a blancmange so I had probably failed in handling the stress...



They prescribed me some medical cream, and Okaasama supported me home. What if I was like this forever...

No, no, I couldn't stress. I would only get balder.

In front of the mirror I swabbed on some of the medicine. I wasn't sure how much I needed, but I wanted to be careful about applying it evenly. It would be terrible if only my right eyebrow suddenly grew back.

I hoped I could hide this tomorrow with just an eyebrow liner and my fringe.

"Aaahh..."

I was definitely performing some purification rites come New Year.

And for now, I'd press the acupoint for hair growth.

Chapter 176

I used a waterproof liner to carefully draw in a natural looking eyebrow.

Since it wasn't all gone, it wasn't so noticeable if you weren't looking carefully.

And besides, if you took everyone's make-up off there were plenty of women who had plucked their eyebrows off! Compared to them I still had the ends!

Plus, my hair was long enough, so as long as I didn't run and was careful in the wind it could be fine! Thank god for being driven to school.

After having a seaweed-based breakfast I prepared to leave for school.

When I arrived, my group was really concerned because I had suddenly skipped a day.

"You seemed healthy enough until the other day. I was so worried to hear you'd suddenly caught a cold, you know?"

"I apologise for worrying you. I felt ill when I woke up in the morning... Perhaps it was just fatigue."

"Gosh, please don't push yourself."

"I know. We visited the hospital too. I am fine now."

"Thank goodness. It's almost winter break, and Christmas is coming up too!"

Christmas...

"What is everyone doing for Christmas?" I asked.

All sorts of answers came out, like going to a party, or going on a trip with family. Everyone's schedules were filled.

Tsk. So it really was just me with nothing to do.

“What are your plans, Reika-sama?”

“Just a small party with some close friends...”

“My! Any party that you’d attend could only be magnificent!”

“No, it truly is nothing like that.”

It’s just a party with some imaginary friends.

I changed the topic to avoid letting something slip.

“Has anything changed while I was away?” I asked.

“No, not really.”

“No, there was, wasn’t there! Huge news too, Reika-sama!”

“Yeah! Yesterday everyone was talking about how Kaburagi-sama was going to be the next President of the Pivoine!”

Oh, that. Thanks to waking up to bald eyebrows my day was quite hectic yesterday, so I had completely forgotten about it. That tea party felt like so long ago.

“Who would have thought that Kaburagi-sama would be President!”

“Fuyuko-sama said that he volunteered himself, or something? Nobody could have imagined he’d ever do that.”

“Actually we were talking about it yesterday, but Kaburagi-sama led his classes during the athletics carnivals and school festivals, didn’t he? He’s perfect for leading the Pivoine.”

“True~ I’m so looking forward to next year!”

“But the people from the Student Council seemed pretty tense...”

“Really?” I prompted.

“The Student Council President didn’t look like he cared, but everyone else had serious

expressions.”

“They all looked pretty grim when they realised they’d have Kaburagi as their opponent next year.”

“I think only the Student Council President and Takamichi Wakaba didn’t seem all that worried.”

“Takamichi-san?”

“I bet her head was empty as always. She’s always looking into space like an idiot, after all. It makes you wonder if she’s really smart enough for the scholarship. Honestly unbelievable.”

“But apparently in the Student Council she’s the best with the calculator.”

“What is that even supposed to mean. Does that have anything to do with being smart?”

“Beats me.”

Hmmm. Quite a lot happened while I was away. Naturally the news about Kaburagi was blowing up. Well, basically any news about Kaburagi blew up.

I doubt everyone would have cared so much if I had taken the seat.

Thinking about it again, though, thank god I hadn’t. I was grateful to Kaburagi for this.

Had I ended up pushed into being President both my eyebrows would have fallen off completely, no doubt.

Whoa ho! Could you please not thoughtlessly open the window, guy over there? Won’t my fringe fly about if you do that?

When I arrived at the salon everyone asked about my cold.

People worrying about my fake illness all day was really doing a number on my conscience...

I was sitting in my usual spot with some camomile tea when Kaburagi and Enjou

arrived.

“Kisshouin-san, I heard you were down with a cold yesterday. Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes...”

I gave a weak smile to play up the ‘getting better’ thing.

“Karin fruits are good for coughing, you know. Yukino drinks a lot of karin tea when he has an attack.”



Karin fruits, also known as Chinese quinces

“I see. Thank you for letting me know.”

Of course, the truth was that I was fine besides my eyebrows. I’d prefer him telling me some medicine for hair growth instead.

“When I came back today I was surprised at how quickly the news of Kaburagi-sama had spread.”

Kaburagi had been sitting there legs crossed and enjoying some black tea. He looked up at me when he heard that.

“Pretty much...” he agreed.

“It was even crazier yesterday,” added Enjou.

“Really?” I asked.

“I mean, Masaya hates being bothered, so everyone was sure he’d never do it, right?”

“That I can understand.”

“I wonder what changed his mind,” Enjou smirked.

Kaburagi suddenly looked away.

I stared at him for a while. When he realised he looked back with a frown.

“What.”

“Oh no, nothing.”

Why on earth *did* you decide to do that, Kaburagi?

Enjou had left for some new tea, so it was just the two of us when he muttered,

“...There are a lot of people in the Pivoine who don’t think well of her.”

His voice was low and quiet, but I heard every word.

Hmmm... So it really was for Wakaba-chan’s sake. He really was the type to do anything for his special person.

“What do you...”

“Eh?”

“What do you think about her...?”

I felt my heart thump as I was fixed by his strong gaze.

“Nothing in particular.”

“...I see.”

Scary.

Maybe it would have been better had I emphasised that I wasn’t her enemy instead.

Maybe it’d have helped avoid any misunderstandings that would lead to my family

being destroyed.

I was about to say something but Enjou returned, and Kaburagi left his seat instead.

I had missed my chance.

Oh dear, don't tell me my left eyebrow was next....!?

The moment I returned home, I made sure to apply the medicine.

*

*

We agreed that I'd be coming over during the weekend to pick up my specially made yule log.



Yaay! I was looking forward to it!

I wonder what Wakaba-chan would be doing for Christmas.

Chapter 177

Today I was picking up the yule log. As planned, we met at the train station closest to her house.

“Here it is! I feel bad making you come all the way here just to get it!”

“No, no. I am feeling rather shameless for having you make a cake just for me.”

“Don’t be! Yule logs are pretty easy to make. Ah, but it wasn’t sloppy work, okay?”

“Of course. I already knew that.”

The reason why we met here was because Wakaba-chan had a train to catch today. Since home was in the same direction we were waiting to catch the train together.

“So you use the train too, Kisshouin-san...”

“My, my, that was how I arrived here today.”

She seemed surprised to hear that.

I suppose she couldn’t help it. I was driven to school each day, after all.

“I thought people from the Pivoine never rode public transport.”

“I suppose there certainly are many like that.”

“Then could it be that you’ve ridden a bike before, Kisshouin-san?”

“Of course.”

“Eh!? *Really!*?”

Was it that surprising?

I used to ride my bike every day in my old life, and in this life I had taken bicycle classes

for my primary school entrance exam too. Not that I had touched one since though.

Since a pair of seats were free we sat next to each other.

Wakaba-chan was wearing a red duffel coat today. I felt that it suited her energy.

“Where are you headed today?”

“Well it’s nearly Christmas, right? I’ve gotta buy my little siblings their presents.”

“I see.”

It had to be tough with as many siblings as she had.

“Speaking of Christmas, what are you doing this year, Takamichi-san?”

“Me? I’m just going to be helping at the store, same as always. It’s always busiest near Christmas. It’s almost winter now, so every day I’ve been hard at work since the morning, you know~”

“That must be tiring.”

“Yeah. Some of the orders from a while ago had overlapping delivery times. It was a nightmare. And for some reason it’s always at times like that that random customers pop into our store.”

“Oh my~ In that case you are certainly not going to be spending Christmas with a special someone.”

“Unfortunately~ But once opening hours are over my family is going to have a party. Well, probably not the types of grand parties that you’re used to, though,” she laughed. “After all, the parties at Kaburagi-kun’s house hire orchestras and opera singers and magicians and stuff, right? That must be so cool~”

“Did you hear that from him?”

“Eh? Yeah.”

“Could it be he invited you?”

“Yeah...”

That idiot...

“But I’ve got to help out at my store. And besides, I’d be so out of place there it wouldn’t be funny. It’s kind of a shame I’ll miss out on a real magician’s show though.”

“I see.”

“And I bet the cakes are going to be amazing too, right~?”

“My. I think the cake you gave me today will outshine them by far.”

“Ehhh~ But my dad didn’t make that one, you know? I did. I’m a bit worried about the taste. If it was one of Dad’s I could definitely boast about it.”

“Huhuhu.”

“...So when you defended our family’s cakes I was really very happy. Thank you.”

“Takamichi-san...”

“Ah, this is my stop. Cya then, Kisshouin-san!”

“Sure. Gokigen’yoh.”

As my train left, Wakaba-chan waved at me from the platform.

When I got home, I discovered that it came with a little meringue Santa Claus, standing besides a little meringue girl with ringlets.

Ehh!? Could that be me!? This was sooo cute! Thank you, Wakaba-chan! I had to take a picture!

It was so cute that I couldn’t bear to eat them, so I left the meringue girl in my room’s refrigerator.

I was going to show it off to Oniisama later!

I took a photo of myself with the meringue figure and sent it with a thank you message

to Wakaba-chan.

When I passed by Kaburagi in the salon it took everything I had not to show off about the meringue doll. I wonder if he'd feel bitter though.

Casually asking Wakaba-chan out though. That was pretty assertive of him. Too bad she turned him down, though. Uupfftpfftpfft.

Maybe he read my mind or something because he sent me a questioning look. Oops, put on a neutral expression, Reika.

"Oh yeah, Kisshouin-san," began Enjou, "apparently Yukino has something he wants to give to you, so do you think you could visit the Petit salon sometime before the day of the closing ceremony?"

"Yukino-kun? What does he want?"

"Apparently he has a Christmas present for you. He actually wanted to hand it to you on the day, but none of us will be at school on Christmas."

"Heavens! A present from Yukino-kun!?"

Oh my god! I was going to get a Christmas present from an angel!?

I didn't think I could quite make it on the day of the closing ceremony, so I told Enjou I would go some day before then. For some reason Kaburagi said he'd come with.

"I kinda wanna see how he's doing in the Petit."

Ehhh!? Then just go on your own sometime! You're completely uninvited, you know!

Today was the day of the Handicrafts Club tea party. Last year I wasn't invited.

This year however, I could brazenly participate. After all, I was a *full member*, and the *Club President*. Ku hu hu!

Ordinarily we were forbidden from bringing snacks to school, but the teachers turned a blind eye on special days like this. We put down the tea and sweets on the table. This was so fun.

After that a number of club members brought out home-made foods like quiche and stollen.



“I made this, if you feel like it.”

“Waah! It looks delicious!”

Teacakes were all rather sweet so I was glad for something else. Bread with dried fruits is good stuff, isn’t it~

Everyone enjoyed the food as we chatted happily about our year.

“It’s embarrassing but I’ve almost never cooked,” said a nearby girl with quiche.

“Actually, neither have I,” admitted another girl, and then another.

“There just isn’t much chance to cook at home.”

“Yeah. There’s never really a reason to.”

“What about you, Reika-sama?”

Ugh! Me!?

“I suppose if I had to say something, I enjoy baking sweets. Nothing complex though, all right? Hmm, my father and brother like chocolate brownies so I make them each Valentine’s. Hmm, and some yoghurt, or cookies with garden roses mixed in...”

“That sounds wonderful!”

“Not really. It was not anything special. Although you can make something feel more

home-made by adding your own touches.”

“I never realised. As expected of you, Reika-sama.”

“We’d all love to try your sweets, Reika-sama.”

“Uhuhu, but my brother made me promise to only let my family try my desserts.”

“Really? Your oniisama really dotes on you, Reika-sama.”

“You think?” I asked.

“Uhuhu,” we all chuckled in harmony.

Phew. I somehow made it out of that topic alive.

I really needed to start Akimi-san’s lessons. We agreed to start after the New Year.

No way could I have told everyone that I couldn’t even use a kitchen knife properly.

Speaking of cooking through, Wakaba-chan’s yule log really was amazing. The mix of tart strawberries inside the sweet chocolate was just perfect!

Wakaba-chan said it was easy to make, so I was thinking of trying my own hand at it. Oh, maybe using lavender jam instead of the strawberries might be nice. It was worth trying out.

Minami-kun, the only male here, had looked a bit uncomfortable at the start, but once the topic changed to handicrafts he turned lively and participated.

“Minami-kun, whatever happened to Ririna, anyhow?”

“She was a little sulky but she accepted it.”

“Good. That girl must always be causing you guys so much trouble.”

“Not at all. It’s easy to misunderstand Kotou-san, but she’s kind and cares a lot about her friends.”

A red-faced Minami-kun took a sip of his tea.

Hmmm~ Heeeh~

To each his own, I guess~

Well anyway, club members, I hope we'll have another great year together!

Chapter 178

Today I had two nuisances along on my trip to the Petit salon. This was supposed to be my sanctuary...

I ended up swinging the bags in both hands as I walked.

Seeing this, Enjou spoke up.

“That looks pretty heavy. I’ll help you carry it.”

Oh? Well in that case.

I handed him the largest one.

“Whoa. This is pretty heavy. What’s inside?”

“Some season-limited Christmas chocolates for the kids.”

Since I was told that Yukino-kun had gotten me a present, I thought about getting presents for him, Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun.

Then I thought about how bad I would feel for the other kids, so in the end I decided to prepare enough chocolate for all of them.

Food and consumables were great for casual presents.

“Huh. I didn’t realise that brand produced Christmas chocolat,” Kaburagi mused.

“It is an assorted set. Some of them are shaped like Christmas trees and the like,” I replied.

“You’re pretty knowledgeable about time-limited products, huh,” he said as he peered into Enjou’s bag from the side.

Also we weren’t close enough for him to know that about me. Oh, was it the peach marshmallow that I gave him to ward off evil?

When we arrived at the Petit salon we were immediately greeted by smiles.

“Reika-oneesan!”

“Gokigen’yoh, Yukino-kun. Gokigen’yoh to you as well, Mao-chan, Yuuri-kun.”

“Gokigen’yoh, Reika-oneesama!”

“Hello Reika... oneesan...”

Yuuri-kun was still as shy about calling me that as ever.

Mhm, mhm, he was a boy after all.

If it’s too hard for you, Yuuri-kun, you can just call me Reika-chan instead, you know?

Anyhow, nobody had any idea that Enjou and Kaburagi were coming. Given how standoffish they generally were, the kids were excited about the rare opportunity to meet them, and immediately crowded them.

Huh.

All this time I was the only visitor here. I’d been monopolising the popularity of being a visiting upperclassman and yet today all their hearts were taken away in an instant.

Even Mao-chan who was like a little sister to me was taking glances over at those two!

Arghhh! I really shouldn’t have brought them here!

“Reika-oneesan? What’s wrong. Come sit down?”

Aaah! Yukino-kun! You’re my only ally here!

I did as he suggested and took my seat on the sofa. Ah, Enjou-sama, please just give out the chocolates however you like.

“You know, there was actually something I wanted to give you, Reika-oneesan.”

Yukino-kun held out a red-ribboned box in his two small hands.

“Reika-oneesan, it’s a little early, but Merry Christmas!”

“Thank you, Yukino-kun!”

I opened the box.

Inside was a snow globe with a boy creating a snowman in front of a Christmas tree. So cute!

“Is this boy you, Yukino-kun?”

“Mhm!” he nodded with a smile.

Given how frail his body was, perhaps he’d never done this before in real life.

I think I remember being told that Enjou and Kaburagi would build snowmen in view of his window when he was sick.

I hoped that he could one day build one himself.

“Then it is my turn next. Merry Christmas, Yukino-kun.”

My present for him was a thick scarf to match his uniform. At the ends of it were little white snowflakes.

I wasn’t sure though, since he might not have much need for a muffler being driven to school and all.

He wrapped it around his neck.

“Wahh! It’s so warm~!” exclaimed Yukino-kun as he rubbed his face against the scarf fringe. “Is the snowflake because my name is Yukino(snowfield)?”

“It is. The snowflake is your symbol.”

“Thank you,” he beamed.

I specially ordered it, actually. I was glad that he liked it.

As for Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun, I got them matching lesson bags; tote bags large

enough to carry things for both school and extracurricular lessons. Having matching things sure was nice for a couple~

I wanted to try something like that myself one day. Ah, not matching clothing though.

“Thank you, Reika-oneesama! I’ll take care of it. Also Yuuri-kun and I got you something too!”

The two of them had gotten me fluffy boots for indoor use. It was completely adorable with little ribboned bonbons attached!

“My! Thank you! I think I shall be using them quite a bit considering how bad I am with the cold.”

They were pink and would match my belly warmer perfectly. With this I was set for winter.

We relaxed for a while, before Enjou and Kaburagi came over having distributed the chocolates.

Mmn. Well done, you two.

You can keep the remaining chocolates as thanks for your hard work.

“Yukino, did Kisshouin-san give you that muffler? Thank you, Kisshouin-san.”

“My pleasure. I should be giving thanks instead for these cute presents I received. Thank you very much.”

That was when the other kids began to thank me for the chocolate, and I ended up surrounded by smiling children myself.

Nuhoho, the presents were super effective.

“I wish you could come to my Christmas party though, Reika-oneesama,” pouted Mao-chan.

“Mao. Reika... oneesan, also has her own plans, so you can’t be so selfish.”

“But...”

Uuu, I want to go too, Mao-chan!

Why did my pride have to get in the way back there! Reika, you idiot! What if I told her that I could come now...

"You're coming too, right, Yukino? Thanks for looking after him," Enjou smiled.

"Yes!" said Mao-chan as she blushed.

Mao-chan! Yuuri-kun is right next to you!

"By the way, Masaya's mum said it was a shame you couldn't come to her party, Kisshouin-san."

"Yeah," Kaburagi nodded without much care.

During my family's party last month his mother had invited me, and then my parents told me a number of times to go, but I completely refused.

It was tiring having to keep up appearances. All those parties were like that.

My parents had stopped trying once the thing with my eyebrows happened though.

All it took was some fake tears and a "I cannot possibly show up like this!"

As a fellow woman, Okaasama could sympathise.

Life is all about turning misfortune into fortune.

"Will you be attending their party, Enjou-sama?"

"Nah, I've got some things to do that day."

Oh? All right then.

Seeing Yukino-kun turn with a pout, Enjou smiled helplessly and patted him on the head.

"I'll be right back," he said.

So the little angel showed his brother these kinds of faces.

How cute~

“Will you be attending your family’s party then, Kaburagi-sama?”

“Pretty much. I didn’t last year, so this year my mother told me to at least make an appearance. I’m planning on heading right home though.”

“I see.”

Last year... Oh, you were on your journey, weren’t you.

Kaburagi seemed bored, because he got up and began gathering the children.

What was he planning.

“You said you were going to spend Christmas with your friends, Kisshouin-san?”

“Well, yes,” I told Enjou.

He was a sharp person. What if he realised I was spending time with my air friends...

What if he realised and then thought of me as some sad case...

I had to change the subject somehow...

“Yukino-kun, what are you hoping from Mr. Santa this year?”

“Eh?”

He looked startled. How come?

“As long as Mr. Santa chooses it, I’m okay with anything,” he replied with a smile.

What age did children stop believing in Santa Claus again?

Kaburagi made a coin disappear, and then made a tissue float, and then some other stuff to the applause of the children.

Party tricks?

And so Suiran entered its winter break.

Chapter 179

I was attending a special winter holiday course at my cram school.

My marks had fallen in the most recent exam so I had to get it together!

A student's main concern was studying, so naturally Christmas wasn't a priority.

Christmas had nothing to do with students.

Naturally.

With that in mind I strode into cram school only to be invited by Umewaka-kun and the others to a 1000 yen random present exchange.

Present exchange?!

Count me in!

This kind of thing really brought back memories.

In my old life my friends and I had gathered together to do a 500 yen random present exchange.

It was extra hard getting presents without knowing who would get it.

If I knew that then I could at least try to get something they'd like.

It was even worse this time because we had both sexes in the pool.

If it was all girls then I could get some cute lip gloss or a nail set, but I didn't think the boys would appreciate that.

Oh, well maybe Iwamuro-kun might, but...

After agonising over it for a while, in the end I decided on a famous onsen bath salt set.

It wasn't something you'd have to keep around after using, and if you didn't like it then your family could.

I wondered if this was the right choice.

It was better than some cute bath bombs at least, since the scent of those might be too sweet for a boy.

During our lunch break on Christmas Eve, we had lunch together in the classroom before singing some songs and exchanging presents.

It was a little embarrassing because there were other people in the classroom, but it was best to be festive for these things, wasn't it!

I wondered who would get my present.

We sang Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer as we passed the presents along in a circle.

When the song was done I ended up with a green-ribboned present, just about large enough to fit in both hands.

I wonder whose this was.

My present ended up in Sasaki-san's hands. Ahh, had I known it'd end up with a girl I would have just gone for the bath bombs!

How was she going to react!

"Wah, bath salts. There's actually quite a bit here. Whose was this?"

"It was mine," I raised my hand to looks of surprise.

"This is *yours*!? Wouldn't have really expected this from you."

"Yeah. I thought Kisshouin-san would have picked something more, rich person? High roller?"

"Uu... Sorry for failing to meet expectations..."

I see. So they weren't expecting a young lady of Suiran to have chosen something so

plebeian. Sorry. I messed up.

“No, no! Sorry! That’s not what I meant! I was just surprised, that’s all! I love bath salts, so I’m really glad to get this. *Onsen* bath salts though. You’ve got some pretty mature taste, huh.”

I *knew* I should have just gone with some la bath salts français! Who cares if they had salts from Beppu and Arima...

After that I opened up the present I got myself. Inside was a single heart-shaped plant of some sort in a little pot...?



“Oh, I got that one. Isn’t it cute? It’s a *hoya kerrii*. Sometimes people call it the love-heart plant.”

“The *hoya kerrii*,” I read, and began looking at the attached instructions for raising it.

Bad with the cold, less water needed in winter... Huh, and you didn’t need to water it every day. Maybe it would be easy to keep it.

“Thank you, Kitazawa-kun. I will try my best to take care of it!”

“Yeah!”

A plant shaped like a heart though. Guy or not, I had to admit it was a pretty stylish choice.

Everyone else excitedly opened their own presents too.

Hand creams, sweets, Christmas mugs and citrus-scented soaps...

My onsen bath salts were the least cute thing here...

Still, the Christmas mood was great! I handed out the sweets I had left over from the Petit salon, and we had that instead of Christmas cake. Yummy.

When I got home my parents were about to head out for a party.

Naturally they invited me, but I declined. Have fun.

When I got back to my room I put in 'The Nightmare Before Christmas'. I ended up watching it while I had dried squid from the convenience store, with soy sauce and mayonnaise.



Somehow or other I ended up watching this every year, didn't I~

Munch munch.

I gulped down some green tea.

Oniichan was going to be out late with work and then the party, but that was fine.

I was fine just watching DVDs all by my lonesome and then falling asleep.

I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to watch after this one yet.

Wakaba-chan was probably quite busy at her family store right now.

Sakura-chan was going to be ringing bells at the church before heading to a party at Akizawa-kun's place as I recalled.

And Aoi-chan was... on a date? Maybe I'd email her.

Ah wait, no, then she'd realise that I had nothing better to do right now.

I had to control myself...

Umewaka-kun sent me a photo of Beatrice in a red nose and antlers.

I was expecting a photo like this, but I had expected a Santa costume instead.

But with those antlers on, considering the Cerberus incident Kaburagi would probably call her a baphomet or something.

'I had Christmas cake with A-tan!

He got me a flower collar as a present.

Isn't it cute?

Merry Christmas, Reika-tan!'

Merry Christmas, Bea-tan.

Late at night I sensed a presence and shot to my feet.

There was a suspicious figure in the dark!

"Ghooooost!!"

I leapt onto my bed so that I wouldn't be possessed.

Spirit begone! Spirit begone!

Why!? I thought ghosts were meant to appear on Halloween, not Christmas!

"Reika, Reika! It's your Otousama! I'm not a ghost!"

"...Otousama?"

I turned on my bed lamp.

In its dim lighting stood a tanuki.

“What are you *doing*, Otousama!”

My heart almost goddamn stopped you know! You stupid tanuki!

I’m all dizzy from standing up too fast now!

“Ah, I mean, you were at home all by yourself, so your Otousama thought he’d leave you a present by your side.”

“Present?”

I looked around and found something left by my bedside.

A present whose wrapping paper was a little ruffled. I must have stepped on it in the confusion.

Still trying to play Santa at this age, huh. You’re wasting your life on dreams, Tanuki.

“Well thank you. At any rate I am going back to sleep, so please return to your room.”

“Okay...”

Otousama left my room dejectedly.

I heard Okaasama talking to him from just outside.

“Didn’t I tell you this would happen?”

Okaasama, if you’re going to dissuade him then do it properly please.

When I woke up the next morning I opened Santa Tanuki’s present.

It turned out to be a ladies watch with diamonds that tumbled above the dial.

Cute.

I had no doubt that it was Okaasama who chose this...

When I arrived at breakfast two Christmas cakes from Otousama and Oniisama sat there, staring at me.

Just who was supposed to eat these.

Maybe if I brought them with me to cram school everyone would finish them for me...

I received a message from Sakura-chan.

For Christmas, Akizawa-kun had given her a ring.

What the *heeeeeell*!?

I gave a prayer to my love-heart plant as I watered it.

Chapter 180

The ūrṇā is the thirty-first physical characteristic of Buddha. It is generally thought to be a whorl of hair and be a mark or sign of the Buddha as a mahāpuruṣa or great being.

Happy New Year. I gained an urna.

Well, strictly speaking it's just a straight white hair on the right edge of my hairline, so maybe it's not an urna but just a lucky hair?

I realised it after the New Year's holiday, just as everyone was returning to their jobs and school.

I was tying up my hair as always to dab medicine onto my eyebrows when I discovered on my forehead what seemed to be a shining clear thread.

What a shock. Apparently I was the reincarnation of a bodhisattva.

Late last year was just packed with so much trouble that I even lost hair.

That's why on New Year's I very thoroughly purified myself.

I even used my own money for very generous donations.

Maybe that's why a few hairs on my eyebrows were starting to grow back.

You've been working hard, my hair roots! Still kind of sparse though.

But still, I bet this was because my biggest cause of stress was gone now.

As for this urna, or lucky hair or whatever, didn't this mean I was bound to be lucky this year!? Both in money and love.

Ah, but as a young girl I couldn't exactly just leave some random hair growing on my forehead...

Maybe it would be fine if I covered it with my fringe?

It was nice seeing all the familiar faces again after the break. I think every school was like this.

“Happy New Year,” I said as I stepped into my group.

“Happy New Year, Reika-sama!” they replied.

We began to chat about winter break.

“I’m fat from all the food I had on New Year’s day.”

“Don’t say that, Kikuno-san. I’ve gotten fatter too~”

“Me too, me too.”

It was the same conversation that every girl had after New Year’s.

Why did New Year’s food make you so fat?

Maybe it was all the rice cakes.



A Japanese soup containing mochi rice cakes. Considered the most auspicious of the dishes eaten on New Year’s Day.

Ozouni.



Sweet red bean 'soup', often with mochi rice cakes for New Year's.

Oshiruko.



Mochi coated with a mixture of soy sauce and sugar, and wrapped with nori seaweed. Also eaten on New Year's.

Isobeyaki had rice cakes too.

Every New Year's you ended up with this weird sense of duty to finish the rice cakes off. Thanks to that you just ended up eating, didn't you.

I wasn't that fond of ozouni, but isobeyaki was delicious.

"Goodness! What a precious watch you have, Reika-sama!"

"Oh, this was my parents' Christmas present to me," I explained.

"My!"

"How did you spend your Christmas?" somebody asked.

"Nothing special," I said. "I just spent it with a small gathering of friends. And you all?"

"I went out to eat with my family, and then they got me the bag I wanted," said one girl.

“I was invited to a party,” answered another.

“I was abroad the entire winter break,” explained a third.

How nice. I wish I could have spent Christmas and New Year’s overseas.

When I was little my family went to Hawaii for Christmas.

The mood was great, with costumed merrymakers all across town.

I could still remember being stunned by my first encounter with a real drag queen. Oniisama had gotten a kiss on the cheek...

Lately Oniisama was too busy to travel though. Without someone to have fun with, vacations hadn’t been as fun recently.

What was fun about swimming in a pool by yourself.

It’d be nice if I had a sister my age, or maybe a friend to go vacationing with.

While I was daydreaming the hallway grew noisy.

“It’s Kaburagi-sama and Enjou-sama!”

The girl’s voice heralded their first appearance of the year.

Every girl began to vacate their classrooms to watch.

“Let’s go too, Reika-sama!”

“Ehh...”

I couldn’t be bothered, but if everyone else was going... Up we go...

Did the pair seem more tan before? Maybe it was my imagination. Then again, maybe they went somewhere.

The girls around them sent their New Year’s greetings. While Enjou responded with a smile, Kaburagi’s responses were uninterested.

“So cool~”

“I greeted them!”

“Don’t they seem even more masculine than before the break?”

The girls in my group were watching with their hands clapsed together, entranced.

“Has it also been since before the break for you, Reika-sama?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a shame, isn’t it.”

Um, not really...

Anyhow, since today was just the ceremony, we were out of school before noon.

The Pivoine had its own greetings, so we all gathered at the salon.

When I arrived, my first greetings were for the new President of the Pivoine for this year. Not that the Presidents of the Pivoine really did anything.

Very Kaburagi of him, I supposed.

After that we relaxed, and greeted each other with some tea.

I was just doing so when Enjou and Kaburagi came along, so I said hello again.

“Happy New Year, Enjou-sama, Kaburagi-sama.”

“Happy New Year, Kisshouin-san.”

“Happy New Year.”

They really did seem kind of tanned, now that I was looking from up close...

I said as much, and they responded that they’d gone skiing in Canada.

Hmm~ Skiing gracefully in Canada, huh.

Quite different from how they spent their last winter, I had to say.

Ah, but I suppose the cold was the same.

“Oh, this is your souvenir, Kisshouin-san. Maple syrup.”

“It was the tastiest one,” Kaburagi added.

“Why thank you!”

Quite unlike the unlucky souvenir of last year.

I wanted to cook up some pancakes already.

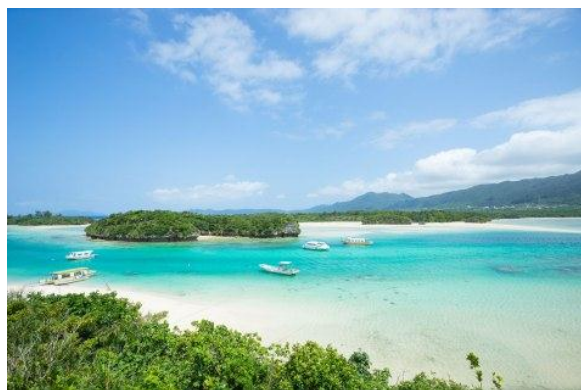
Incidentally by that ‘tastiest one’ comment, Kaburagi, don’t tell me you went and compared them all?

Anyway, if the two of them were on holiday then I wonder what Yukino-kun was doing.

He wasn’t well, so I couldn’t imagine he could have gone skiing.

“Was Yukino-kun alone at home?” I asked.

“He went with my parents to Okinawa,” Enjou replied. “I think he’s looking a little better after relaxing somewhere warmer.”



“That sounds wonderful!”

I was finding it hard to mesh Yukino-kun and the tropics, but still, Okinawa was a nice place!

“But can Yukino-kun swim?”

“Technically. He’s been doing it to help his endurance.”

“I had no idea.”

“Apparently he was swimming in Okinawa too. I’ve seen some photos of my him and my parents at the beach or in the pool.”

“My, that sounds like fun. I hope to see these photos too.”

“We should visit the Petit Pivoine again sometime.”

“Indeed.”

But I have to wonder if Yukino-kun hadn’t wanted to go with his oniichan.

Damned Kaburagi, how could you separate the two.

By instinct I sent him a look of blame.

He looked back at me and said,

“Miruku.”

Ha? Miruku?

“Ah, nothing. Sorry, I was thinking about Okinawa when I saw your face and that word just came to mind.”

“I see...”

“Don’t worry about it, Kisshouin-san,” agreed Enjou.

“I see...”

Wondering what on earth was going on, when I got home I looked the word up.



Miruku, Okinawan god of fertility

Kaburagiiiiiiiiiii!

My face brought Miruku to mind!? Are you saying I look like him!? This ridiculous face!?

You're slandering a bodhisattva like me!?

Unforgivable!

I ended up venting to Hoya-chan the hoyo kerii.

After all, people said that talking to plants would make them grow faster!

I spoke to Hoya-chan every day.

Later on I had some pancakes made, and then I ate them with the Canadian maple syrup.

What the hell!?

So delicious!

...In light of this wonderful maple syrup, I'll forgive you just this once, Kaburagi.

Chapter 181

Apparently Fellow Stalking Horse was quite popular.

His looks were pretty good and he demonstrated ability in his role as Student Council President.

He treated everyone the same, even if they were a Pivoine, and he was both trustworthy and reliable.

As a result he was popular with both sexes.

I suppose it just came down to the author's taste, but in the manga he and the Emperor were kind of similar.

Both of them were charismatic and had presence, and masculine faces.

In the colour illustrations their hair colours had made them look like a black panther and silver wolf.

In any other romance novel you'd expect them to be complete opposites though.

That fact that they weren't had pretty much convinced me back in the day that the author was simply into this type of overbearing guy.

I suppose there was only one huge difference between them.

While the Emperor was cold and aloof, the Student Council President was approachable as you'd expect from his position.

He was sincere with everyone he spoke to.

The result was a boatload of confessions.

"Apparently the StuCo President was confessed to again."

"Who was it this time?"

“That first year, I hear. The one that’s supposedly somewhat cute. You know the one.”

We had barely begun the new term and already somebody had confessed to him?

For a man that was supposed to be the vice-chief, why was he so different to the chief?

Anyway, whether you were cute or not, Fellow Stalking Horse treated you equally and was never cruel in his rejection.

It was admirable.

After all, there were *plenty* of guys who changed their attitude based on who was confessing.

‘You don’t have to go out with me. I just wanted you to know how I felt.’

Girls who told him this were never-ending.

Huh.

I supposed the Emperor was like that too.

After all, whether you were cute or not, the Emperor treated you equally. If you weren’t Yurie-sama it was a frosty “Not interested.”

That’s why almost nobody confessed to him, despite his popularity.

Speaking of which, I wonder how Maihama-san was doing~

Anyway, going back to Stalking Horse, rumour had it that he had his first shrine visit of the New Year with Wakaba-chan.

It was a famous shrine, so apparently plenty of people spotted them.

When girls questioned him about it, he claimed that he had gone with the entire Student Council, not just with her. Still, it hadn’t changed the fact that in the bustle of the shrine the pair had been together the entire time, and looked awfully close.

Making matters worse, Emperor Kaburagi was still greeting Wakaba-chan just like last year, and would strike up a chat whenever he went to Enjou’s class.

Whether the StuCo Pres or the Emperor, Wakaba-chan's intimacy with the two was already seeing her glared at with jealous eyes.

I was on my way back from club activities.

There was a textbook that I needed for studies tonight, so I was heading by my locker to pick it up.

I was walking down the empty hallway when I spotted one Wakaba-chan heading into the bathroom.

Since there was nobody else around, I figured I may as well wish her a belated Happy New Year.

That's why I followed her in, only to find her in just her blouse, washing her jacket in the clean washbasin.

"...Takamichi-san?" I called out quietly.

Wakaba-chan turned around with a start.

"Oh, it was you, Kisshouin-san. What's up?"

"What's up, you ask? *I* wanted to ask that."

I glanced at the dirtied white jacket in her hands.

Now that I was looking carefully, I realised her skirt was in the same condition.

"Is that... paint water...?"

"Eh? Yeah, I bumped into somebody earlier."

"Bumped into whom?"

"I didn't really see their face. They said sorry, and then disappeared."

"Disappeared? They dirtied your clothes and then ran!?"

"Ahh~ Yeah..."

That was absolutely intentional. Even their membership in the Art Club was dubious.

“But I can’t get the stains out of white clothing. I might have to send it for dry cleaning...”

“This is horrible. You should find the culprit and demand the dry cleaning funds! And from the looks of these stains, who knows if even that would do the job!”

“I’ve got a coupon for dry cleaning, so don’t worry about that. I got a bonus from last year’s term-end exams too. I’ll just have to rely on the dry cleaners to do their best... It’s going to be rough without a jacket tomorrow thoughhh.”

“Eh!? Is this your only one!?”

“Mmn.”

Overcoat or not, commuting by train without a jacket in this weather was unreasonable.

And to begin with, although I wasn’t sure if it was actually against regulations, not wearing the jacket could make her stand out as much as the gum boots did for all I knew.

“Coming here without a jacket may be a problem. Particularly when it comes to the former president of the Pivoine.”

“Ah, thought so.”

Wakaba-chan frowned.

“And I don’t even know if the stains will even come out. I guess I have no choice but to buy one then. Man, this is going to be tough on expenses...”

I was hesitant, but I couldn’t help but speak after seeing how troubled she looked.

“Umm, I have a spare set so, what if I gave it to you?”

“Ehh!? Even I’d feel bad about that!”

I had a number of spare uniforms in case some got dirty.

Giving her one wasn't an issue at all.

Stains just wouldn't do on white clothing after all.

"These uniforms are expensive. I can't take something like that from you! This is completely different to slippers, you know!"

"But at this rate you will have to pay yourself, no?"

"Hmmm..."

The school uniforms were expensive.

I wasn't sure *exactly* how expensive but I wouldn't be surprised if a set cost more than ¥100,000.

"Ah!"

"Eh?"

Oh! I *did* have one I didn't need! One that I'd probably never wear again!

"I have one spoilt one that I wear no longer. It would put me at ease if you could find a use for it."

"Ummm... Is this spoilt one cleaner than what I'm wearing?"

"Yes. I had it sent to the dry cleaners so it *should* be clean. However... originally it had bird faeces on it..."

"Eh!? Again!?"

"Indeed," I nodded gravely.

It happened on a chilly afternoon.

I was going on an after-lunch walk with my friends.

I had been looking to the side at the time when from the skies above a bird dropped its poop onto my head!

Even though it missed my head, it still landed on my skirt.

Since it was soft and still steaming fresh it bounced off my skirt and ended up dirtying my jacket too.

“A bird pooped on Reika-sama again!”

“Hold *on*, Reika-sama! It’s not too bad! It only hit your uniform today!”

Everyone brought me to the school infirmary as my mind struggled to reboot from shock and it somehow managed to get off with detergent.

After that I immediately had somebody bring me a new change of clothes from home, and then sent the bird-poop set to the cleaners.

Still, I didn’t feel too good about it and never ended up wearing it again.

Why was it just me that had to get pooped on. Grrrr, it was outrageous!

I suppose it was a matter of outlook though.

There were islands made of bird poop in the world that you could get phosphate from and make a fortune, so maybe the bird pooping on me would one day lead to the same.

Yeah. No. It’s impossible after all.

Anyway, although she was hesitant I managed to convince Wakaba-chan and I brought her home with me in my family car.

“What a huge house~”

Wakaba-chan was just staring in shock with her mouth gaping.

Thank goodness, my parents weren’t home yet.

We headed to my room.

I took out the poop uniform and handed it to her.

“How is it?”

“Wah! It isn’t dirtied at all! Can I really take such a new uniform off you?”

“I do not intend on wearing it again, and have plenty of spares besides. Please stop hesitating and take it.”

“Really? Thank you! Ah, but will the size fit? We’re about the same height, but I’m pretty thick, you know? I’m not skinny like you are.”

“Nonsense~ We look the same~ Ohohoho.”

I was in a pretty good mood.

Wakaba-chan tried it on.

“Hmmm...?”

Apparently the waist for my uniform was loose on her—

“...Shall I lend you a sewing set?”

“Umm, I can do it at home!”

Out of consideration, Wakaba-chan just smiled past the awkwardness.

Not that I’m making excuses, but that uniform was back from when I was eating out with Ichinokura-san, okay!

I’m way skinnier now!

“Thanks for this, really. I want to pay you back so come over and play sometime, okay? My family wants to meet you too!”

“Yes, I look forward to it.”

I saw Wakaba-chan off at the nearest station.

After passing through the ticket gates, she turned and waved at me with energy before leaving.

I couldn’t help but wonder who had done this.

A fan of the Emperor, or a fan of Fellow Stalking Horse...

Chapter 182

Last year I asked Akimi-san to teach me cooking.

We had a talk over the phone recently to discuss exactly what type of cooking she'd be teaching me.

The type of dishes I'd bring out at a house party? Or did I want her to teach me home cooking instead?

In the end I chose the latter without hesitation.

I wasn't exactly planning on too many house parties, and even if I was I could just ask for catering services.

On the other hand, if I was ever going to live alone, or get married and live without a maid, I was going to need to know how to cook.

Plus, in the short term I wanted something like Aoi-chan had! She was cooking meals for her boyfriend right now!

Then she asked if I wanted to learn Japanese dishes or Western dishes, so I went with the former for now.

If I got down basic traditional stuff like nimono would it make me seem more filial and down-to-earth?



Nimono is a category of traditional stewed recipes. Pictured above is a nitsuke dish, specifically black halibut nitsuke.

Well, whatever else aside I liked Japanese foods. That was the biggest reason.

Anyway, after getting all of this sorted out eventually I visited her house.

“Welcome, Reika-san.”

“Akimi-san, gokigen’yoh. I will be in your care today.”

I had heard that her family was well-off, and now it showed.

Her house was both newly built and large.

“Please just make yourself at home. My father is out playing golf, and my mother is having lunch out with her friends right now.”

“Thank you.”

After handing over my gift to her I followed Akimi-san into the house.

“Just like we discussed, first I’ll have you try some of my food, and then if you like it I’ll teach you how to make it. Does that sound okay?”

“Yes.”

“They’re all just simple dishes today. Would you like to try them now?”

“My, you prepared them in advanced for me?”

“Yes. It’s just simple soups and side dishes though.”

She guided me into her large living room where a number of dishes sat ready.

Whoa! They looked good.

But for some reason there were two of everything.

“They’re the same dishes but I prepared them in different ways.”

“Different ways?”

“Yes. I...”

“A guest, Akimi?” called a male voice.

Turning around, I saw a familiar face enter the dining room.

It was the guy who I exacted demiglace revenge on for being rude to Akimi-san, Demiglace!

“Oniisama...”

“Oniisama!?”

Demiglace was Akimi-san’s oniisan!?

No way!

I framed him with demiglace without even knowing who he was!?

“You must be Reika-san from the Kisshouin family.”

“Y-Yes. Forgive my late introduction. I am Kisshouin Reika. Thank you for having me today.”

“What brings you to our home, Reika-san?”

“Akimi-san was going to teach me cooking today.”

“Cooking? Akimi?”

Demiglace, now identified as Akimi-san’s oniisan, looked at the dishes on the table only to frown.

“Akimi, don’t tell me you were planning on teaching Reika-san how to cook menial dishes like these.”

Hah?

I looked at the table.

There was chikuzenni, buridaikon, and shiraae with spinach and fried tofu.



Buri Daikon (ぶり大根) is simmered yellowtail (buri) and daikon radish in a seasoned broth. A cheap winter dish.



Chikuzenni (筑前煮 chikuzen-ni) is a dish that originated from northern Kyushu, Japan, made of braised chicken and vegetables



Shiraae (白和え) tofu paste mixed with spinach and fried tofu.

“You brought out these lowly meals for the daughter of the *Kisshouin* family? What the hell were you thinking.”

“Wait-”

Akimi-san hung her head sadly.

“Please wait. I asked her for this, and these are my favourite dishes. Is there something wrong with buridaikon? Eating fresh seasonal ingredients is the height of luxury!”

Huh. Yellowtail *was* in season, right...?

I swear I heard somewhere that yellowtail was in winter...

Gods above, please let me have been right.

“Well, if you say so, Reika-san,” he said hesitantly, before continuing. “But Akimi, are you even fit to teach somebody like Reika-san? You should be getting her to teach you manners and grace instead.”

“In my eyes, Akimi-san is already a splendid lady,” I countered.

Akimi-san is curling up here, so could you go away already?

“Well then, I have plans, so please excuse me Reika-san.”

Maybe my prayers had worked because Demi-brother left after excusing himself.

“...Sorry, Reika-san. I put you through something unpleasant.”

“Nothing of the sort! But I had no idea that man was your oniisama...”

“Yes... It seems that he detests me for being so fat and unsightly...”

“...”

But demi-brother seemed pretty plump himself.

Her okaasama was round too, so maybe the Narutomi family was just like that.

“More importantly, I’ll have go reheat the food. I only hope it suits you.”

“I look forward to it.”

Right.

Now that the rude interlopers were gone, it was time to get back to the food sampling.

Akimi-san came back with the reheated food and placed it in front of me.

“The reason I actually have two of each is because I’ve made them different ways. One is made with a standard recipe and proper ingredients, while the other is the kind of commoners’ flavour that I prefer. I thought it would help to see what you liked.”

“I see. Then may I help myself?”

“Please do.”

I began with some of the miso soup with green onions and tofu.

Mn, yummy!

So this was the standard one.

Next was her commoner recipe, huh.

Oh...

“What’s wrong, Reika-san?”

This tasted like... the way Mum used to make it...

“Reika-san?”

Oh no, my eyes were tearing up.

It was Mum’s miso soup.

“Reika-san... Was it not to your taste...?”

“...No. It was... very delicious.”

“Really? You don’t have to force yourself. I didn’t use much katsuobushi in this one so it might not taste that good...”

“No. Please teach me how to make it like this.”

“This one? Are you sure it isn’t too common tasting for you?”

“Please.”

I lowered my head to her.

I never had Mum teach me so I was sure I’d never get to eat it again.

But now the taste was almost in reach.

If I learnt how to make Akimi-san’s food, then perhaps one day I could recreate Mum’s.

That was my goal now.

“Please.”

“Well, if you insist...”

In the end, all of the side dishes were delicious.

And unsurprisingly, the commoner versions were nostalgic.

Mn.

I’d definitely go with those ones.

Akimi-san seemed a little taken aback when I asked though.

“I never would have imagined that you’d prefer *these* ones. It makes me happy though.”

“Is this how you normally cook these dishes?”

“Oh no, when my family is eating I use the expensive ones,” she smiled. “It’s embarrassing, but my family are nouveau riche. Did you know?”

Oh, come to think of it, her father had built his fortune with real estate, hadn’t he...

“In my grandmother’s generation we were an average farming family in the outskirts of the city. It was nothing but mountains and fields and countryside where we lived, but the value of the land jumped up with suburban planning, so the money from that helped my father’s business.”

“I see.”

“When my brother and I were born, our family was already wealthy. We grew up in luxury. But my grandmother still kept her habits of economising, or being a poor person if you like.”

“Right.”

“My brother often tells me this too, but I’ve been clumsy since I was little. Sometimes other children would call me an upstart as well, so whenever that happened I’d run crying to my grandmother’s house.”

“My...”

“After helping her cook for a while, I grew to love cooking as well. I mentioned earlier though that my grandmother’s habits were set. She was stingy with her cooking too.”

“Stingy?”

“Yes. She was quite stingy when making broth. She wouldn’t use much stock base, and even made second or third brew, you know?”

“I see.”

Second or third brew...?

I just nodded like I knew what she was talking about.

“You might find this hard to believe but you can actually use the katsuobushi to make furikake afterwards. You can also actually eat the leaves of the daikon and turnip, and even grow them yourself.”

“Grow them?”

“Yes. You water them near the top and they’ll start to grow leaves.”

Oh!

Mum used to do that in the kitchen!

For a while I thought it was for decoration or something.

“When I cook for others I’m generous with ingredients. But I’d still like to cherish the taste of my grandmother’s cooking too. I think this is actually what food is like in normal households, you know?”

“I understand.”

Come to think of it, at home I sometimes saw the cook fill the entire pot full of katsuobushi.

I never saw Mum do that in my old life though.

Thinking about it, Mum had been pretty stingy herself, hadn’t she.

Her food was yummy though.

“Huhu. I never would have thought a genuine ojousama like you would have picked these ones though. Obaachan might be happy to hear that.”

“I will be in your care, Sensei.”

“Gosh, don’t call me that.”

Akimi-san was a genuinely good person.

If I was in her position I’d never admit that I was from an upstart family.

I was convinced now. Akimi-san would never laugh if I admitted I couldn’t really use a kitchen knife.

“Akimi-san, the truth is, um, I cannot even cut vegetables with a knife properly...”

And I was just pretending before, so please tell me what that second broth thing is.

Chapter 183

Daji was the favorite consort of King Zhou of Shang, the last king of the Shang dynasty in ancient China. She is portrayed as a malevolent fox spirit in legends as well as novels.

Daji was from a noble family called Su (蘇) from the state of Yousu (有蘇). Hence, she is also known as Su Daji. In 1047 BC, King Zhou of Shang invaded Yousu and took Daji as his prize.

King Zhou became extremely infatuated with Daji and started to neglect state affairs in order to keep her company. He used any means necessary to ingratiate himself with her and to please her. Daji liked animals so he built her a zoological Xanadu with several rare species of birds and animals. He also ordered artists to compose lewd music and choreograph bawdy dances to satisfy her musical taste. He gathered 3000 guests at one party to indulge in his “pond of wine” and “forest of meat”. He allowed the guests to play a cat and mouse game nude in the forest to amuse Daji. When one of King Zhou’s concubines, the daughter of Lord Jiu, protested, King Zhou had her executed. Her father was ground in pieces and his flesh fed to King Zhou’s vassals.

Daji’s greatest joy was to hear people cry in physical torment. Once, she saw a farmer walking barefoot on ice and ordered his feet cut off so she could study them and figure out why they were so resistant to low temperatures. On another occasion, she had a pregnant woman’s belly cut open so it satisfied her curiosity to find out what happened inside. To verify an ancient saying that “a good man’s heart has seven apertures”, she even had the heart of the minister Bi Gan (King Zhou’s uncle) dug out and subjected to her scrutiny.

Daji was best known for her invention of a method of torture known as Paolao (炮烙). A bronze cylinder covered with oil was heated like a furnace with charcoal beneath until its sides became extremely hot. The victim was made to walk on top of the slowly heating cylinder and he was forced to shift his feet to avoid the burning. The oily surface made it difficult for the victim to maintain his position and balance. If the victim fell into the charcoal below, he would be burnt to death. The victim was forced to dance and scream in agony before dying while the observing King Zhou and Daji would laugh in delight.

Daji was executed on the orders of King Wu of Zhou after the fall of the Shang dynasty

on the advice of Jiang Ziya.

In Japan she is sometimes conflated with Tamamo no Mae.

Boy were my arms sore.

I spent a long time cutting vegetables at Akimi-san's cooking class.

Because I was so worried about slipping and cutting myself I held onto the knife for dear life.

And even when I wanted to peel things thinly I couldn't help but imagine cutting my thumb. In the end they all ended up with large chunks hewn off.

Akimi-san peeled them all so smoothly but I was awkward and stiff.

Maybe it was time to give up and just use a peeler.

Even when we were slicing vegetables with the claw grip I kept picturing cutting my own joints and couldn't hold it properly.

Why are you such a coward, Reika!

In the end she lent me protectors especially for that. You inserted it between your knife and the vegetables.

It didn't look very cool though...

Akimi-san said we should take it easy and start with the basics first.

That's why I wanted to hurry up and master them.

When I got home I began practising with a carrot in the corner of the kitchen.

I think maybe I was a little better now.

Ah, I got ahead of myself.

I cut my finger.

I decided to buy a protector tomorrow.

When the school term began I could see Tsuruhana-san and her friends growing more imperious again.

Apparently over Christmas they hired an event hall and had their own party.

Among the attendees were External boys from 2nd and 3rd year, and it got pretty big.

Thanks to the party they all deepened their bonds, and even got some new members or something.

That was bad news.

They weren't the only other minor faction in our school either.

If the Pivoine was content to just coast on their authority they might get the rug pulled from under them.

So far I had been pretty assured in my position thanks to the Pivoine, but this year the president was Kaburagi.

Youko-sama would have protected any Pivoine member without a thought.

On the other hand, I couldn't see that indifferent guy lending me a hand.

This year I had to protect my position on my own.

Hmmm...

I had been hoping to spend the year peacefully, too...

Unaware of my worries, the new President of the Pivoine spent each day sipping tea peacefully in the salon.

Ah crap.

Had it been a mistake to let this guy become the president?

But there wasn't anyone else either...

Maybe if only I had somehow gotten Enjou to accept...

Ah, but then Enjou wasn't the type to butt into fights between girls either.

Maybe it would be best to quietly discuss this with my group first.

I discussed it with my group.

The result was that they were raring for a fight now.

"You're completely right, Reika-sama! We've all been thinking that those girls have been getting arrogant lately!"

"Ever since we became high schoolers they've been strutting about like they own the place. They even provoke us sometimes."

"It looks like they're already forgotten the lesson you taught them in middle school, Reika-sama."

"Speaking of which, those externals that cosy up with the Student Council have been more audacious too, I think."

"Yeah, yeah! Ever since high school began they've all been really arrogant for Externals. They've really forgotten whose school this is."

Huh?

...All I said was, 'It seems that Tsuruhana-san, as well as the External Students have been building up power. What should we do if they challenge us?'

Never, ever did I say 'Those bitches piss me off so let's fuck 'em up!'

"Umm, everyone, perhaps a more peaceful..."

"And you know what else! I overheard a most outrageous plot!"

"What's this? A plot?"

“A horrendous plot devised by the External lackeys to pair Takamichi Wakaba and Kaburagi-sama together!”

“Oh my god!”

“What’s the meaning of this!?”

Everyone was practically frothing at the mouth.

“Apparently they think they can use Takamichi Wakaba to make the Emperor their ally and then take over the school.”

“What the hell!? Is she Daji!?”

“Unforgivable!”

Eeehh...

“Ummm... Do all of the Externals think this way?”

“No, just a portion of them. There are a lot of Externals who admire Kaburagi-sama instead and aren’t really pleased with Takamichi Wakaba themselves. The External Students aren’t a monolith after all.”

“I see...”

Wakaba-chan, somehow you’ve gotten yourself into something crazy again.

I wonder if she’d be okay...

“That’s why you need to try harder, Reika-sama!”

“Eh, me?” I asked.

“Yes! You need to punish Tsuruhana’s gang and that insolent Takamichi Wakaba too!”

“And then take the Emperor’s heart for yourself!”

“Haah!?”

And so they sunk into a sea of delusions, far beyond my reach.

And thanks to this chat, things had gotten even messier...

Scary.

To heal my weary heart I headed to my garden of angels.

“Welcome, Reika-oneesan!”

“Gokigen’yoh, Yukino-kun.”

I had been greeted with a beaming smile when I opened the door to the Petit salon.

Haah, my worries were melting away.

Yukino-kun and I sat on the couch and chatted between snacks.

“Yukino-kun, did you have fun with your parents in Okinawa?”

“Yes. We went to the aquarium and went whale watching too.”

“I see. I love aquariums too.”

“There was this huge manatee at the aquarium and...” he began recounting.

I wanted to see some manatees too.

“Did *you* go anywhere, Reika-oneesan?” he asked.

“I went to Kyoto. My mother has family there,” I explained.

It was so cold I thought I would die.

The chill in Kyoto reached right into my bones.

I’d bought the kids some fox mask rice crackers and konpeitoh as souvenirs.

I was particularly proud of the crackers. They were cute, so perfect for children.

“Here, these are for you,” I said as I began handing them out to Mao and the others too.

“Wah! Thank you very much!”

The kids seemed overjoyed.

Yay!

“Huh? Reika-oneesan, what happened to your finger?” asked Yukino-kun.

He gazed at my bandaged hand in worry.

“This? How embarrassing. I was doing a little cooking and slipped up a tad.”

“You can cook, Reika-oneesan?” Yukino-kun asked with sparkling eyes.

“Ehh, well, just a little bit of home cooking.”

“Why kind of foods do you make?”

“Only very simple dishes. Nimono and the like.”

I may have boasted a little to keep him impressed.

“That’s amazing,” he gushed-

-before dropping a bombshell.

“I want to try your cooking too, Reika-oneesan!”

“...Eh!?”

“My birthday is coming up soon. Do you think I could try some on the day?”

“...Eh!?”

I just got landed a crazy request.

Akimi-saaaaaan!! What do I *dooo*!?

Is Yukino-kun's stomach going to be okay...!?

Chapter 184

Thanks to my big lying mouth I now had a sword above my head.

And I put it there!

When are you going to learn your lesson already, Reika!?

Do you have the brain of a goldfish or something!?

I immediately sent Akimi-san an SOS.

I obviously couldn't bring homemade nimono to his party.

To begin with I couldn't *cook* nimono!

And to think that just a few days after picking home cooking over party foods I'd need to know how to cook party foods.

Haah, I'm so beat~

Enjou spoke to me first thing next morning.

"Yukino tells me that apparently you're going to be coming to his birthday party. And with your own cooking no less."

Uuu...

Yukino-kun, have you already told your whole family?

My escape was looking less and less likely.

"Yes... But bringing poor food on such an important day feels like an insult instead of a gift, so I was thinking of declining this time..."

"Yukino was ecstatic, you know. Apparently he's already looking forward to it."

“I...”

Yukino-kuuuun...

I felt like I was going to lose my eyebrows over the pressure again.

“It’s not that big of a party since we have to take care of his condition too. It’ll just be a few of his friends from primary, so don’t worry so much. Well, I won’t force you though,” he said as he glanced at my fingers.

Don’t tell me he could tell my skill?

I didn’t want to disappoint Yukino-kun by refusing.

But I didn’t want to disappoint him with my actual cooking either.

Akimi-san, save me.

You’re my only hope, Akimi-san!

I’ll practice cutting vegetables every day!

I’ll even memorise all the recipes so please, lend me your strength!

Still...

“Please at least tell him not to expect too much...”

‘Food-Poisoning at the Enjou Residence!’

I’d do my best not to make that headline a reality.

After school, Class Rep and I were headed for the staff room to submit the reports our classmates did.

Apparently Class Rep had gone with the other three for their New Year’s shrine visit.

“We all got our fortunes and wrote our wishes on ema,” he bashfully told me.

Going on your New Year’s shrine visit with your crush...

What the hell, that sounded super fun.

Why wasn't I invited?

In-vi-t-e me.

Aren't I the one who introduced you all to begin with~?

"And I prayed that Honda-san and I would grow closer this year."

"Hmm~"

"And Honda-san and Nonose-san are making their Valentine's chocolates together, and they said they'd give some to Iwamuro-kun and I... Ah, as friends of course! I already knew that. Mn."

"Hmmm~"

"But I hope one day I'll be able to get a real one from her."

"Hmmmm~"

Valentine's huh.

I didn't even have somebody to give romantic chocolates to this year.

I was running out of time...

I only had one year left in high school.

I wanted to have a dreamy Valentine's too.

Maybe I could just bite the bullet and give it to Naru-kun.

But then how would a real guy feel about being given chocolates by complete stranger?

It was how they did things in shoujo manga though.

Plus, I didn't know what I wanted to make this year.

“Kisshouin-san? Still listening?”

Oops, he realised I was just nodding along.

“Why don’t you take those feelings and make her chocolates instead?” I joked.

His eyes sparkled.

Eh? Really?

After we handed over the reports we said goodbye and headed to our respective clubs.

I was already done with the belly warmer so I needed to make something else this year.

“Kisshouin-san,” came a voice from behind.

It turned out to be Wakaba-chan.

“Is something the matter, Takamichi-san?”

She looked around to check that we were alone before walking over to me.

“Say, are you free to come over?”

“Eh!?”

Wakaba-chan was inviting me over!?

Why so suddenly!?

She lowered her voice further before speaking again.

“Don’t you remember? You gave me your uniform the other day. That’s why I wanted to thank you.”

“I, you really should not worry about that. To begin with I was never going to wear those again.”

“Yeah, but still I got something so expensive for free. I’ve been wondering how I could

make it up to you all this time, you know. Not that just a cake could really pay you back this time..."

"You really need not worry about that. I mean it. Still, I am very happy that you have invited me over."

"Really? Then is there anything you want, or that you'd like me to do? There isn't much I can help you with though."

"Just being able to eat your family's cakes is more than enough."

"And I've been saying that that isn't enough."

We were going down the stairs together when I suddenly remembered the manga.

There was a scene when Kisshouin Reika had shoved Wakaba-chan down stairs just like these.

I quickly put some distance between us.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah, nothing to worry about."

Not that I'd ever do that now, but I stayed away just in case.

Wakaba-chan seemed perplexed about it.

"Ah, by the way. Takamichi-san, could you teach me how to make Valentine's chocolates?"

"Valentine's?" she asked.

"Yes."

What a great idea.

Wakaba-chan loved making desserts.

If I made it together with her then I'm sure something delicious would come of it.

Not that there was anybody to receive it but my family though!

“You could have asked for that whenever,” she objected.

“It seems that I shall be in your care then,” I smiled broadly.

After I bought the claw grip protector I stopped cutting myself.

The cut from the first day was almost healed too.

I was putting a new bandage on it when Oniisama came home with Imari-sama as well.

“Imari-sama, long time no see!”

“Belated Happy New Year, Reika-chan.”

“Happy New Year, Imari-sama.”

You’re sparkling as usual, Imari-sama. You look wonderful in that suit.

“I’ve actually got something to give you, Reika-chan.”

“What is it?”

He reached into his bag and brought out a ribboned box.

“Here. A souvenir from Nagasaki.”

“Wahh, thank you very much. Your parents live there, no?”

“Yep. I showed up for New Year’s. My younger brother had just come back from America so we went there together.”

“I see.”

Imari-sama’s younger brother was staying in America as an exchange student at the moment.

Apparently he liked it better than stuffy old Japan.

I unsealed my present.

In the past Imari-sama had gifted me cute marbles from Nagasaki, or castella sponge cakes.

I still loved those marbles.

Imari-sama had a good sense of what girls liked.

“Wah! Pearls!?”

I opened the velvet case to find a necklace, with a pearl embedded in a silver heart like a teardrop.

“How *lovely*!”

“Nagasaki is famous for its pearls, after all. I think they suit you. Shall I put it on for you?”

“Don’t touch people’s little sisters whenever you want, Imari,” Oniisama said with a chilling glare.

“Reika-chan, your oniisan is so scary. You know, people say that pearls are the tears of mermaids and fairies, but if that’s true I’d rather that girls cry tears of joy than sadness.”

Oniisama brought down an iron fist onto the smiling Casanova Village Chief’s head.

“Owowowow!”

“Die. Kill yourself! Drown at sea and become the core of some pearl!”

He began strangling Imari-sama with force.

How rare for somebody as kind and peaceful as Oniisama.

They sure got along.

“Thank you for the wonderful present, Imari-sama. Oh, I know! I shall make a pearl chocolate for you for Valentine’s!”

“Ehh? Chocolate from Reika-chan? That sounds great,” he smiled happily, even as he was being beaten across the head.

Having someone outside of your family to give chocolates to really got your motivation up, after all!

“Reika, that...”

You can look forward to it too, Oniisama!

Hmmm, and I also need to get started on Yukino-kun’s birthday food, and...

Chapter 185

I wasn't sure what exactly I wanted to make for Valentine's Day yet.

That's why I decided to talk to Wakaba-chan about it when I went to her house.

She asked me when would be a good day for me, so I picked the soonest day we both had off.

Wakaba-chan laughed at me.

Maybe she realised I had nothing else to do.

But I was a pretty busy person too. I had jogging on the weekends, and I had lessons to go to every fortnight too!

It wasn't like I sat around at home every weekend!

Going to Wakaba-chan's house always required a change of trains.

Brr, it was cold.

As I stepped past the ticket barriers I saw Wakaba-chan waving energetically at me.

"Kisshouin-saaan!"

"Sorry, did I keep you?"

"No, no, don't worry about it."

Today she was wearing a red duffle coat and a lively smile brightened her face.

"Have you had lunch yet? We've got some hayashi rice at home, but we can eat out too if you want?"



A beef-based dish with demiglace.

“No need to trouble yourself. Will you be all right?”

“I’m fine too. Then my house it is.”

We set off at a relaxed pace.

“Say, Takamichi-san? How has it been since we last spoke? The bullying.”

“Eh? Ahh, mmn. You know how it is.”

“I see.”

From what I heard, sometimes there’d be footprints on her desk, and other times people would purposefully bump into her.

They were still bitching about her right in front of her too.

“But they haven’t touched my uniform since then.”

“Of course. How could you bear it if they did it regularly.”

“No arguing that,” she guffawed.

“If there is anything I can do...” I began.

“You’re doing plenty. You’ve given me shoes, and even a uniform set. I’m really super grateful to you, you know?”

“But...”

“And if you go around openly supporting me your position will worsen, right? The

people in the Pivoine don't seem to like me after all."

"Eh..."

She was spot on, of course.

It was hard to say what would happen to my influence and position if we openly associated.

"Don't worry about it. I already have people to look out for me. Like everyone at the Student Council."

"Ahh..."

Right. Since she had Fellow Stalking Horse and her friends at the Student Council, they'd protect her from open attacks.

That would make things worse with Stalking Horse's fans though.

"And umm, it really is just a tiny minority, but you know that there are people who don't think well of the Pivoine, right?"

"Well, yes."

There had always been people who thought we were all a bunch of bullies who used our connections and family to do whatever we wanted.

The current Student Council and its followers were the same.

The Pivoine and Student Council had a deep-rooted hostility.

Tomoe-senpai was great at balancing the two. He even hid his relationship with Kasumi-sama until graduation.

Hahhh~

Fellow Stalking Horse was quite popular too, and although he wasn't a match for the Emperor, he was quite charismatic as well.

Had I been made the President of the Pivoine then I could easily see anti-Pivoine

elements rising up at the worst time possible.

That was why I was so scared when they asked me to step up.

It wouldn't be something to laugh off if the Pivoine was destroyed while I was in office.

Just thinking about it had been enough to make my eyebrows fall off.

I was actually so lucky that the Emperor had taken the mantle instead!

"Even if I'm like this, I'm still technically a Student Council member, and you're a pretty famous member of the Pivoine. If people realised we spoke we'd probably both be labelled traitors, huh~"

"Indeed..."

Social ties were soooo bothersome.

How come we couldn't just be friends with who we wanted.

"So I'm fine with you not doing anything. I'll make it work on my own. Well, I say that but you've helped me so many times already," said Wakaba-chan as she stuck her tongue out. "We've been talking about this for so long that we're here already. Let's stop talking about it, okay? Especially in front of my family."

"I understand."

It sounded like she hadn't told her family how she was being treated at school.

Nobody wanted to worry their family after all.

I stepped into her house for the third time.

Today my visiting gift were arare crackers.

"You don't have to bring a gift every time, you know. From now on don't bring anymore, okay! We're not all that fancy!"

"It is really nothing much though."

“I said that you don’t have to. I’m happy, but if you keep giving us stuff each time it makes it hard to invite you over.”

“Really?”

Was that how it was?

Huh.

Come to think of it, maybe I hadn’t brought gifts like this in my old life.

“But you know, my family gobbled up the karintoh from last time, so thanks!”

“It was my pleasure.”

Wakaba-chan took my gift with both hands and then bowed politely.

“Now then! You wanted to make something for Valentine’s?”

“Yes. Please look after me, Sensei.”

“Ahaha, but are you okay with me? I can’t really make anything too fancy, you know?”

“I like your cooking the way it is. The yule log you gave me for Christmas was delicious as well. Do you think I could make a little meringue person too?”

“Ohh, that. Yeah, once you master the trick it’s just artistic talent.”

“Artistic talent...”

I didn’t have much confidence in mine.

I was thinking that they might be happy to receive little dolls of them, but...

“What have you been making for the previous Valentine’s?”

“Hmmm~ I made chocolate brownies a few times. My friend had invited me to a pâtissier’s class. Oh, last year I made chocolate cake. Hmm, also truffles, ganache...”

“You’ve made quite a lot then.”

“Yes. But it was always amateurish and never compared to what you could buy in a shop.”

“Hmmm~ Well, those are pros after all.”

“Quite so... I suppose it would be asking a bit much for your everyday person to match them.”

“You can definitely get better though. And muffins and stuff are better when they’re right out of the oven.”

“Muffins! Chocolate muffins for Valentine’s might be nice as well!”

“Yeah, sounds fine. Might feel a little plain though.”

“Hmmm, certainly...”

I suppose chocolate muffins might be a little plain for something that only happened once a year.

“Then how about fondant au chocolat?”

“That sounds wonderful!”



Fondant au chocolat

I’d wanted to try making one for a long time now.

“So you’re fine with fondant au chocolat? Then shall we practice today? Or would you like to try making something else for now?”

“Something else? For example?”

“Let’s see... For Valentine’s I’ve made like chocolate cheesecakes, French chocolate cakes, opera cakes and stuff like that.”

“Chocolate cheesecake sounds interesting.”

If I could make that myself then that meant I could make normal cheesecake too.

That could be nice.

“I see. Then let’s try making a chocolate cheesecake today.”

“Understood!” I said as I shot to my feet.

Just as my stomach began to rumble.

Gyah!

Was it all the talk about food!?

“...How about some lunch first?”

“No, I really am...”

Damn you, stomach! Stop rumbling!

How much do you want to embarrass me before you’re satisfied!?

“Oh right! I put some to the side!” she said with a clap.

Wakaba-chan ran off and heated up a pot of something.

Was it the hayashi rice she mentioned earlier?

In the end she came over with a small bowl of okayu congee with egg and greens.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you. Itadakimasu.”

I wasn’t really all that hungry, but since she had warmed it up for me I’d happily eat it.

After blowing on my spoon a bit, I scooped some up and tried it.

Hot! Hot!

“How is it?”

“Hot, but delicious.”

Mn.

I wasn't sick or anything but okayu could be nice too.

Why okayu though?

Didn't she say she had hayashi rice?

And what *was* this green vegetable mixed in with the egg?

Wait, were these *wild* vegetables?

I scooped some up with my spoon and had a look at it.

Wakaba-chan beamed at me.

“What you're eating is seven-herb congee. I know that the 7th of January is already way gone, but still. Now you'll be healthy all year.”

“Ah, so this was seven-herb congee. I had not realised with all the egg.”

Seven-herb congee huh. Hm? Seven-herb congee...?

Wait, did she pick these vegetables in Suiran Forest...?

“I'm glad that you seem to be enjoying it, Kisshouin-san~”

“...”

So basically you turned me into an accessory to your wild vegetable theft, Wakaba-chan...?

Chapter 186

After I cleaned up the rest of the seven-herb congee it was finally time to make the sweets.

I put on the apron I brought from home.

“Hmmmm, the utensils are here and the flavourings are over here. As for the recipes it’s right here in this book,” said Wakaba-chan as she showed me her notebook.

“Did you come up with these yourself, Takamichi-san?”

“Dad taught me some of them, and some caught my eye in recipe books. A number I heard from other people too.”

“I see.”

My cooking was usually wherever my inspiration led me in the moment so I didn’t have much regarding recipes.

Not that any of my creations were worth recreating with a recipe.

“Let’s break out the ingredients then. First we need cream cheese, chocolate, and eggs.”

“Eh?”

I found a familiar jar in her fridge.

“This is...”

“Hmm? Ohh, *that*. I got it as a souvenir from someone else. It’s actually amazingly good! Do you wanna try some, Kisshouin-san?”

There was no mistaking it.

It was the very same maple syrup that I got from Enjou and Kaburagi.

“Could it be that you received this from Kaburagi-sama?”

“Eh-, how’d you know!?”

“I received some as well. To be honest my preferences lean towards honey, but this was so good it beat out everything in my honey collection.”

“So that’s why! It was so delicious that I couldn’t bear to make stuff with it so I’ve just been eating it a bit at a time but everyone finds it so delicious that there isn’t much left. And it’s sooo good on vanilla ice cream.”

“That *does* sound good!”

Putting it on ice cream, huh.

It was a bit cold for ice cream, but maybe I could try it after my next bath.

“But man, it sounds amazing going to Canada for a skiing vacation. I’ve never been overseas before.”

“You have the shop after all.”

With so many family members and the cake shop too it couldn’t have been easy to organise an overseas holiday.

...Hm?

Aahh! I’d almost forgotten!

“Passport!”

“Huh?”

“Takamichi-san! Do you have a passport!?”

“A passport? No?”

At Suiran our high school trip was obviously overseas.

And at Suiran it was almost a matter of course that everyone had a passport.

It was actually a plot point in the manga that she didn't have one.

In the end she just managed to get one in time, but everyone mocked her for not having one to begin with.

"You know that we will be going to Europe for the field trip, no? Almost everybody at Suiran has a passport already so nobody mentions passports until it is almost time to go."

"I see."

"I think it would be best if you applied for one soon. It takes time to gather the documents and the photos, and it takes another 10 days after that to receive it."

"Oh okay. I hadn't thought of that at all! Thanks for letting me know, Kisshouin-san! I'll go get one soon!"

Ahh, thank goodness I remembered.

She had been pretty ashamed in the manga.

It had been over 15 years since I last read it so it was hard remembering all the little episodes.

You did well reminding me, Kaburagi's maple syrup!

Although I wonder when he even gave it to her.

"All right then! Shall we begin?"

"Okay~"

Under Wakaba-chan's instruction I began making the chocolate cheesecake.

I mixed ingredients as I followed the recipe.

Wakaba-chan was really particular about it.

"You really need to follow the amounts that the recipe says."

“Yes.”

“Ah... Just now you put in the cream cheese without measuring, didn't you.”

“I thought it would be nice with a little more...”

“It's going to clump up.”

“A few lumps gives it character, no?”

“No. Mix it in properly.”

“Okaay.”

You're pretty strict, Wakaba-chaan.

“I'm home!” called an energetic voice.

Her oldest younger brother had just come back.

“Welcome back.”

“Welcome home,” I said as well.

“Ah! It's the cornet girl!” he said, pointing right at me.

“Kanta!” chided Wakaba-chan, “Her name isn't cornet girl, it's Kisshouin-san! And don't point at people!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Answer me properly!”

“Alright, alright,” he waved her off as he headed off to wash his hands.

“Sorry about him,” she apologised.

“No worries. It must be rough being an older sister.”

“He's been so full of himself since entering middle school. He doesn't listen to anything

I say. Geez,” she muttered as she began mixing up the bowl again.

“Hey, Cornet,” called Kanta-kun while I was looking at the notebook.

“Yes?”

“Look at this! Neechan got it from some guy!”

Kanta-kun was holding a teddybear.

“Kanta! You went into my room again, didn’t you!” fumed Wakaba-chan.

From his face, Kanta-kun didn’t seem too bothered.

“He sent it to her on Christmas!” he revealed.

“Could it have been from...”

“Ah, well,” she said awkwardly.

Kaburagi, huh.

“Isn’t it kind of childish to send her a doll though?”

“Kanta!”

“This teddybear is a limited edition Christmas product from Germany,” I noted.

“Really?”

“So it’s not just some bear?” Kanta-kun asked.

“Well, it certainly is a teddybear,” I conceded, “but I would feel bad for it if you lumped it together with the others. It comes with a serial number too. A very respectable teddybear.”

Buying her this, huh.

Despite making fun of me for liking limited-edition products he went and bought one himself.

“I accepted it because it was just a stuffed toy, but don’t tell me this is expensive...?”

Wakaba-chan seemed almost afraid to ask.

“Just a few tens of thousand yen, I recall.”

“Tens of thousands!?” she cried.

“That’s freaking expensive!” baulked her brother.

Both siblings seemed horrified at it.

“You’re freaking expensive for a doll, aren’t you!”

“What do I do? It was a doll so I was just like ‘yeah, thanks!’”

While the two of them kicked up a fuss, I didn’t really see the big deal.

“Why not just accept it? You know, this is actually rather cheap for a present from Kaburagi-sama.”

“Holy shit.”

“A doll that costs tens of thousands of yen...”

While the two of them were reeling from shock, I took the chance to continue making the cheesecake.

Oh, maybe I could add some liqueur for extra flavour.

Here we go.

“Ah!? *Kisshouin-san!* What are you doing!?”

“Hm? Adding some liqueur.”

“Why are you adding it to begin with? The recipe doesn’t list it, right?”

“Well, I thought it might taste better.”

Both Wakaba-chan and Kanta-kun stared at me speechless for a while. He was still holding the bear.

“...I’ve been thinking this for a while now, but could it be that you’ve always been cooking like this? Adding things however you want, I mean.”

“Well, perhaps not however I want. But sometimes inspiration just strikes me. Every meal should be a unique experience, and all that.”

“My god...” she muttered.

Off to the side, Kanta-kun took a spoon of the mixture to taste.

“Urgh!” he grimaced. “What the hell is this supposed to be!? It’s sour! And bitter!”

“So you added enough liqueur to make it bitter, Kisshouin-san...”

“You’re exaggerating, Kanta-kun! I only put in a little!”

“Even the aftertaste is bitter! As the son of a baker I can’t accept this! If you’re baking a cake then *always* follow the recipe!”

“That cannot be...”

“I think Kanta’s right...” said Wakaba-chan. “When it comes to making sweets you need to be exacting with the amounts. This might be why your cooking hasn’t been as good as what you’ve bought...”

After that, Wakaba-chan adjusted the batter while Kanta-kun guarded me from doing anything unnecessary.

Eventually we somehow managed to make the cheesecake.

“Yummy!”

It was probably one of the best two things I’d ever made!

This was huge!

“This isn’t good at all...”

“Yeah...”

The verdict of the siblings was harsher though.

They went back into another lecture on how important it was to follow the recipe.

Then her dad showed up and repeated it again to me. How important it was to measure the ingredients properly.

I felt enlightened.

So unlike regular cooking, the knack to making desserts was following the recipe.

I vowed to improve.

When it was time to leave, Wakaba-chan came with me to the station.

Since we had the time, I asked her about Christmas again.

“Ummm... Well, when we were about to close up the store, Kaburagi-kun appeared and said that it was a Christmas present.”

“I see.”

“He was wearing this jet black coat and seemed more mature than usual. And the streetlights seemed to make him shine so I was like, whoa, this is a real Emperor!”

“Hmmmm~”

So that damned Kaburagi slipped out from his family’s party to hand this to her?

Apparently quite a few things were happening without my knowledge.

I decided to ask him next time.

“Well then, goodbye for now.”

“Yeah. Stay safe!”

I passed through the ticket barriers as she waved goodbye.

Chapter 187

I decided to just completely rely on Wakaba-chan for Valentine's Day.

We were going to make fondant au chocolat on the day.

Normally I only had Oniisama and Otousama to give chocolates.

I just followed recipes on my own.

Learning from somebody was a completely different experience.

This year, Valentine's would be in Wakaba-chan's hands.

Still, this wasn't anything serious, since it was basically between family.

If I couldn't make something delicious for Imari-sama then I could just buy him something.

Yukino-kun's party food was an entirely different story.

For one thing it wasn't my family doing the eating.

For another it was going to be the Enjou family of all things.

Bringing something weird over was unacceptable.

After some discussion with Akimi-san, we decided to make chirashizushi.



Literally toppings on sushi rice.

For one thing I could distract them with pretty colours, and for another the vinegar in the sushi rice could ward off any chance of food poisoning.

Yukino-kun's birthday was on a Saturday this year so Akimi-san could come over in the morning to help with the food.

After that the plan was for me to head straight to the party.

Before that day I had been reading over her recipe every day, and practised making kinshitamago egg strips by myself.



It was burnt.

I couldn't cut it thinly.

Mmn. I'd leave this part to Akimi-san.

"Kisshouin-san, I'm sorry for my brother's wilfulness. If it's too hard to make the food you can just refuse, you know?" Enjou said.

Perhaps he noticed that I was reading cooking books at the salon too.

"It is no trouble. I hope I will not disappoint when I say that I am only bringing something simple. I was only reading the book because I had some interest in it."

And I was telling the truth.

After all the cooking lessons with Akimi-san and the vegetable cutting practice I did at home, I was really starting to gain an interest in cooking.

The house chef had been throwing the vegetables I used for practice into a blender to

make soups and dressings and stuff.

Apparently none of the vegetables I practised with were good for main dishes.

The potage they made from the potato the other day was really good.

I was feeling pretty bad about always getting them to clean up after me so these days I had been looking up recipes I could use them in myself.

Curry was probably the best choice in the end.

Next chance I had, maybe I could try making curry with pre-made curry sauce.

The family cook never used store-bought sauce. All of it was made from scratch.

I did kind of miss the flavour of supermarket curry though.

Like the curry I had at Wakaba-chan's house.

In my old life, Mum used to blend two different brands together.

It was tastier like that.

Plus, I knew the trick to making it perfect.

You had to add chocolate or yoghurt to it.

...Chocolate or yoghurt though.

Basically anything sweet would do, right?

In that case, what if I added flan?

If I used milk pudding instead, wouldn't that dissolve easier?

Then again I wasn't really into the really sweet curries.

In that case maybe I could use spicier curry sauce to balance it out?

It would be nice if I could bring out an original flavour even after using store-bought

sauce.

Maybe I could add some miracle fruits.

I decided to ask Akimi-san what she thought.

“Kisshouin-san? Still here with me?”

“Eh? Ah, my apologies. I am listening.”

Oops.

I was so lost with the thought of curry that I hadn’t noticed what he said.

“I just hope that the cooking won’t trouble you too much. There aren’t even twenty guests, so don’t worry about it too hard.”

“I understand.”

Mao-chan and Yuuri-kun would probably be there too.

There was the pressure of her mother’s cooking now.

But I had Akimi-san with me!

She’d make it work somehow, so there was no problem!

On the day, Akimi-san came over in the morning, as promised.

“Gokigen’yoh, Akimi-san. I feel bad taking up your weekend like this.”

“Don’t be. Let’s do our best together.”

“Yes.”

The ingredients were already prepared in the kitchen.

All I had to do now was have Akimi-san work her magic.

I thought of having her take a break in the living room first but my family knew about

her visit and waited for her at the entrance.

“Welcome, Akimi-san. Thank you for helping my sister today.”

“Apparently Reika has been learning cooking from you,” said Otousama. “My daughter will be in your care, Akimi-san.”

“Please take care of my daughter, Akimi-san,” said Okaasama.

“Apparently the son of the Enjou family requested Reika’s cooking,” continued Otousama.

“After all, all of the Enjou family will be eating this,” continued Okaasama.

“Dad, Mum, just leave it at that,” Oniisama stopped them. “Akimi-san, I’ll send you home, so just let me know when you’re done.”

“Y-Yes...”

Since Akimi-san seemed visibly overwhelmed I shooed my family off and then brought her to the kitchen.

Thank goodness for Oniisama.

“What should I do. There’s so much pressure now...”

“Sorry about them, Akimi-san. Originally I wanted to have tea with you in the living room first, but what would you prefer? I have no doubts my family will be waiting there.”

“It’s fine. I’m okay. I want to start as soon as possible. We need time in case we mess up.”

Even though she was so happy just a moment ago, Akimi-san’s expression was all business now.

I’m sorry...

I mentioned learning cooking from her earlier, but I only recently slipped up about the party.

As soon as they heard that they kicked up a huge fuss and kept trying to convince me to let our cook do it, or to hire some restaurant to make the food instead.

I couldn't lie to Yukino-kun about it so I refused them each time.

I told them that it would be fine with Akimi-san's help, but they were still nervous about it.

Especially Okaasama. She was really something else.

She even said that if I brought bad food this time it would affect my prospects of marriage in the future.

I knew it would end up like this so I hadn't really been planning on telling them.

Then again it affected them too so I couldn't just keep mum about it.

"Shall we begin then, Reika-san?"

"Yes."

At first we had planned to do equal shares but in the end Akimi-san basically made it herself.

Especially the seasoning. That was all her.

As for what I did, it was mostly fanning the sushi rice with a fan...

But I did beat the eggs, and I put the rice into the bucket too. I also passed her ingredients, moved the utensils out of the way, and made sure to assist her.

I mean, this counted as making it together, right?

The finished chirashizushi went into stacked boxes, and the rest was left for my parents and Oniisama to try first.

They seemed to be worrying about it the whole time after all.

"This is delicious!" exclaimed my mother.

“The Enjou family can eat this without issue!” exclaimed my father.

“It’s delicious, Reika. Thank you, Akimi-san,” Oniisama thanked her.

“Thank you so much, Akimi-san!”

After seeing the exaggerated response, Akimi-san finally seemed to relax.

“Thank goodness...”

Since I had the party to get to, I left my seat first while Akimi-san rested in the living room.

I came back after changing and found her chatting amiably with Oniisama.

“Are you ready, Reika? In that case I’ll take you as well while I send Akimi-san home.”

“Please do, Oniisama. I have a lot to carry, so could you help with that?”

“You’re carrying quite a lot already, Reika-san. Are you okay?”

“Huhuhu!”

In the end I was bringing quite a bit. We had the chirashizushi too, after all.

“Shall we go?”

Wait for me, Yukino-kun!

Ah-, I forgot to talk to Akimi-san about the curry.

Chapter 188

The Enjou estate was a Western-styled mansion in chalk white.

It was the kind of place you'd expect the two brothers to live in, really.

Since I had so many things to carry, Oniisama escorted me to the door.

Enjou was the one to receive me.

"Welcome, Kisshouin-san."

"Gokigen'yoh, Enjou-sama."

"Good afternoon, Shuusuke-kun. Thank you for having my sister for the day."

"She's very welcome."

Oniisama and Enjou shared a smile, before he handed over the goods to Enjou who welcomed me into the house.

"Be polite now," Oniisama reminded me before heading off.

Today he was wearing a rough, grey cardigan.

I rarely saw him outside of uniform or formal-wear for parties.

Thanks to that my maiden's heart couldn't help but skip just a little.

Damn it.

If you're attractive enough then anything looks good on you...

"You're wearing all white today, huh. It's cute on you. You're like a rabbit."

"Ueh!?"

I was so surprised that I made a weird sound!

I thought my heart was going to fly out of my chest!

R-R-Rabbit!?

Casually dropping a line with that while smiling at the girl? What kind of skill was this!

Enjou was actually a provisional resident of the Casanova village!?

Wait, or was he a permanent resident!?

Oh my god, don't tell me he was Imari-sama's successor!?

Sound the alarms! Sound the alarms!

"Ah, this way to the party."

Unconcerned with my inner turmoil, Enjou guided me through his house.

Urghh, wasn't there some way I could sneak revenge on him for this?

I looked for any hairs on the back of his cardigan.

If a stranger plucked off a hair from you it could jinx your next crush.

Enjou was too well-groomed though, so there was nothing for it.

Tsk.

After walking for a while, eventually I heard the happy laughter of children at the end of a hallway.

"Yukino's friends are already here so it's lively."

"Was I late? Perhaps I should apologise."

"Not at all. The party won't start for a while yet. Plus, Masaya told me he'd be coming late today."

“Kaburagi-sama is coming?”

“Yup.”

Hmmm~

So he had enough sense to come to Yukino-kun’s birthday party.

Then again, Kaburagi *did* seem to dote on him.

I opened the door to excited children.

“Yukino, Kisshouin-san’s here.”

Yukino-kun had been having fun with a lot of friends but his brother’s words caused him to turn and flash a dazzling smile at me.

“Reika-oneesan!”

“Happy birthday, Yukino-kun,” I waved.

His mother, who had been giving instructions to the house staff, noticed and came over as well.

“Welcome, Reika-san.”

“Gokigen’yoh. Thank you very much for inviting me over today.”

Her impression might have been sylphlike and transient, but her smile was all Yukino-kun.

“I should be thanking you for coming here for Yukino.”

“Umm, this is the homemade food that I promised Yukino-kun, but...”

“My, thank you. I heard about it. I’m sorry about that, Reika-san. He can be so wilful.”

“Not at all. It was truly nothing much.”

“How about you leave that with me for now? Or would you prefer to hand it to him

yourself? He *has* been looking forward to it.”

While we were chatting, Yukino-kun reached out and beckoned me over.

“Over here, Reika-oneesan! Come sit here!”

He seemed more lively today.

Cute.

“Honestly, that boy of mine. Sorry again, Reika-san. Could you bear with him for a little?”

“Huhu, of course.”

Madam Enjou gave a helpless smile as I made my way to Yukino-kun.

Since I had missed my chance to hand the food over, I was still carrying the chirashizushi in my hand as I sat down near him.

From his smile he seemed to be having the time of his life.

Enjou left to receive more tiny arrivals to the party.

It turned out to be quite a few kids together, leaving only Kaburagi to arrive.

Since we were only missing him, the party began.

They darkened the room, and we all began singing.

An extravagant two-story cake with seven candles on it was placed in front of Yukino-kun.

When our song ended, he blew them all out to our applause.

“Happy birthday, Yukino-kun!”

“Happy birthday!”

Yukino-kun flushed and thanked us with a happy smile.

While everyone was busy giving him presents, the staff cut up the cake and left servings at everyone's seats.

I handed Yukino-kun my present as well.

"Thank you, Reika-oneesan!"

"Happy birthday, Yukino-kun."

"What is it? It's kind of big, huh."

"Open it later and see."

I hoped he liked it.

It was hard because he was both a kid and a boy.

The table was filled with foods catered to children, and Yukino-kun opened a few presents at random while he ate his cake.

"Reika-san, could you bring your food out over there?"

"Ah, yes."

Uu, so it was finally time.

I unwrapped the layered boxes, and did as Mrs. Enjou said, placing it on the table.

Yukino-kun's face lit up into a smile.

"Wah! You really made food for me!"

"Yuki-chan, where's your thanks?"

"Thank you, Reika-oneesan!"

"You are very welcome. I only hope that it suits your taste..."

I watched a little nervously as the children peered on at the lid being lifted.

“Chirashizushi! It’s so pretty!”

“Did Reika-oneesama make this? I want to try it too!”

“It looks good.”

Ooh, at least the appearance seemed okay.

Thank goodness.

The one who put the strips of nori seaweed was me, you know.

“You’re so good at cooking, Reika-san. I heard from your mother that you often cooked at home.”

“No, it is embarrassing but I am still learning.”

Apparently Okaasama had had a lot of fun boasting about me outside the family.

Was that why she was so worried about the food I brought?

My cooking would have revealed quite a number of things about us.

Honestly, as if one parent hadn’t been enough...

“Since Reika-san went to all the trouble, how about you try some of her food right now, Yuki-chan?”

“Yeah.”

Madam Enjou served some onto a plate for him.

I could feel my heart pounding in anticipation.

Yukino-kun tried a bite.

“Yummy! It’s so good, Reika-oneesan!” he exclaimed.

The little angel was smiling. Thank goodness!

His mother, Mao-chan, and everyone else praised it too.

We did it, Akimi-san!

Since the boxes weren't all that big the chirashizushi disappeared in no time.

I was soooo relieved!

"Mm, it really was delicious. I didn't know you were that good at cooking, Kisshouin-san."

Enjou had finished everything on the plate too.

I guess unlike Kaburagi he was totally fine with homemade food.

Oh, or had he forced himself?

"I didn't force myself."

Gyaah! He read my mind!

I *knew* he was scary!

"No, it's just written all over your face."

Really?

Oh my god, he read it *again*!

I was terrified at having any more thoughts read so I turned my back to him and began awkwardly eating cake.

"Reika-oneesama, you're even amazing at cooking," Mao-chan gushed in admiration.

"She really is," added Yukino-kun.

Uuu, the purity of these children was making me guilty...

"I actually made this together with my cooking teacher," I admitted almost immediately.

“Really? But that means you still made it, Reika-oneesama.”

“Well, I suppose. Since I had help, getting all the praise to myself made me feel bad for her.”

Although, I really did help, and although we arranged the toppings together, the praise belonged to Akimi-san.

“Huhu, you’re an upright person, Reika-san. Who was it that taught you?” asked Mrs. Enjou.

“It was Akimi-san from the Narutomi family. She cooks as a hobby, so she has been teaching me as a personal favour.”

“I see. The daughter of the Narutomi family is still a student, if I remember correctly.”

“She is.”

After that Mao-chan said that she wanted to try cooking lessons too.

Although since her mum was such a good cook, she could honestly just have her teach her.

When Yukino-kun finished his cake he began opening his presents among his friends.

It was time for mine next I realised while I was watching him react happily to the last one.

I hoped it was fine...

“I wonder what it is.”

“It’s pretty big.”

“Hurry and open it, Yukino-kun.”

“Okay. Wahh, what is this?”

Since he had asthma, I decided to get him a humidifier.

Not just any humidifier though.

There were two layers of transparent globes, and between them were little figures of sea animals floating in a mixture of water and blue oil.

There were dolphins, whales, clownfish, even the manatees that he had been fond of in Okinawa.

It made for a rather cute piece of interior decoration.

A mini-aquarium that doubled as a humidifier.

To be honest, the humidifier was the less impressive half.

“So cute! There’s dolphins swimming about.”

“There are the manatees you love so much too, you know?”

“Eh-, where?”

While he was happily looking for manatees I contentedly handed him one more box.

“Yukino-kun, open this too. This is a little extra.”

“Eh? This too?” he asked in surprise. “Hmm?”

Opening it up, Yukino-kun looked a little confused.

“What is this?” he asked in wonder.

Inside the box were numerous puzzle rings, from beginners’ to some really difficult ones.

“Those are puzzle rings,” I answered. “Have you heard of them? You need to use your head to untangle them.”

“Oooh!”

They were perfect for killing time.

Since I knew he had to stay home a lot, I thought they would be good to play with by himself.

When I was small I liked jigsaw puzzles and stuff too.

The children seemed interested enough and began trying to solve them.

“Hmm, this is hard.”

“I can’t do it at all.”

“Wahh! Yukino-kun’s Oniisama solved one!”

Earlier, one of the girls had asked him for help, so he had untangled the rings and gently passed them back.

Mmn. I was glad that everyone had fun with them.

I had actually brought Jenga and boardgames with me too.

Would those be a good idea?

That was when one of the staff announced Kaburagi’s arrival.

Chapter 189

“I’m late. Sorry.”

A ripple of noise and excitement, particularly amongst the girls, ran through the kids as Kaburagi made his dashing entrance.

Today he was wearing mostly all black so he gave off the impression of resplendent black quartz.

No, Mao-chan, being entranced is *bad*! Yuuri-kun is still right next to you!

Kaburagi made a beeline for Yukino-kun.

“Happy birthday, Yukino. Here. Your present,” he said as he handed it over. “I bought some cake too.”

I realised he was holding a bag from a cake store in his other hand.

Wakaba-chan’s cake store.

“Masaya, don’t tell me you were late because you went to get that?”

“Pretty much.”

Ehh!?

What the hell!?

He came late to the party because he wanted to go meet Wakaba-chan!?

Or was it that he went to pick up the cake only to forget the time with her?

Either way, he still used the birthday cake as an excuse to go meet her!

Yukino-kun opened up the cake box with his mother.

“Oh, a snowman.”

It was a simple white birthday cake with strawberries on top.

Written right in the middle with chocolate was ‘Happy Birthday Yukino’, and to the side was a little meringue snowman.

“You like snowmen, don’t you? They asked me if I wanted anything else on the cake, so I had them make that for you.”

“Wow. It’s cute.”

Since we had the cake anyway, we lit up another set of candles on it.

The fancy cake from earlier was delicious, but if I had to say, simple strawberry birthday cakes like this were my favourite.

We began to sing Happy Birthday again.

I was doing my best to sing, but Kaburagi just clapped.

Sing!

“Happy Birthday, Yukino-kun!”

The cake wasn’t all that big so each portion was smaller.

Since I was an adult I left the strawberries for the kids.

Even though cream with strawberries was delicious.

Even though I loved that stuff.

I was an adult after all.

Yukino-kun was being adorably conflicted about whether or not to eat the snowman.

I totally understood how he felt.

When I saw the little Reika-chan figure I couldn’t bear to eat it either.

In the end it had actually met the new year from the inside of my freezer.

I wonder how long meringue lasted...

The cake from Wakaba-chan's family store was delicious even without the strawberries!

Maybe I'd buy some the next time I was there.

"Yuki-chan, why don't you open your present from Masaya-san?"

"Mm. Wah, it's heavy."

As it turned out, Kaburagi had gotten him a large book of Escher's art.

"I chose it since you seemed interested in Escher. Something to look at the next time you're bedridden."

How could he bring up being 'bedridden' on a birthday!?

Yukino-kun didn't mind the ill omen though.

He just thanked him before fervently examining the book.

I wondered though.

Could it be that Kaburagi actually liked gifting books to people?

I remembered getting an anthology of Heine poems from him.

His father had a rare book collection too.

Maybe he was influenced.

"Would everyone else like to look too?" asked Yukino-kun.

"Sure," I answered.

So we sat down next to him, as he skimmed through the book.

"This is making me a little dizzy," his mother commented at some point, so she left.

Before long the other kids went off to play the board games I brought, or video games on the big screen t.v., so Yukino-kun shut the book and joined them.

Maybe I would join them.

But Jenga was too nervewracking even though I was the one to bring it, so perhaps a nice boardgame.

The Kaburagi family were celebrating the birth of new children again, this time a pair of twins.

“Your family sure has a lot of children...” I muttered.

“Masaya-niisama has a big family,” said Yukino-kun.

“Scamming the government for money, Masaya?” laughed Enjou.

“Shut it and send over the gifts already,” Kaburagi replied.

“Oh my. I seem to have found oil in my back yard.”

“That’s amazing, Reika-neesan! Next is Masaya-niisama’s turn. Oh, Masaya-niisama, your investments suffered a huge loss.”

“What the hell! This roulette has to be broken somehow!”

“Whatever, Masaya. The bank is waiting. Pay up.”

“Damn it!”

“Huh. So I get to seize property from one player?” mused Enjou. “Masaya it is then.”

“Haah!? Why the hell did you pick me!? Pick the person with the most money instead!”

“It was a process of elimination. The criteria was the one I’d feel the least bad taking from.”

“Fuck off!”

“Ah, I get to seize property too~” Yukino-kun exclaimed. “Please pay up, Masaya-

niisama.”

His Majesty the Emperor was bankrupt.

The two Enjou brothers had mercilessly squeezed him for everything he had.

Kaburagi was in a terrible mood, but since Yukino-kun was having fun it wasn't an issue.

Kaburagi looked like he was about to steam though.

What happened to the cool-headed and capable Emperor that everyone talked about?

You could really see people's personalities by playing these sorts of games.

Kaburagi who boldly displayed the money he had on hand.

I, who hid my fortunes from view with a handkerchief.

Enjou who kept his money in plain view, but probably had secret stashes elsewhere.

Speaking of Enjou.

“I was surprised that you knew about these sorts of games, Kisshouin-san,” he said.

“Really?” I asked.

I suppose I did wonder if it was a bit too commoner before the party.

I wasn't much older than my little sister in my old life so we used to play games like this a lot.

And for New Years when grandpa's family, and all our cousins and stuff gathered, we'd all play board games or card games as well. It was really fun.

It was harder playing these games with siblings further from your age, so I thought it was fair if I indulged in these once in a while.

“One more time!”

“I’m done.”

“Running away, huh.”

“I’m not running away! I’m just sick of children’s games, that’s all.”

“You’re the most childish one here though.”

Kaburagi just clicked his tongue and stomped off.

Since the sucker of the game had run off, the three of us began playing peacefully with the new children who had come along.

At some point I heard shouts of amazement.

It turned out that Kaburagi had become a hero in Jenga.

“I won because of careful analysis and the courage to take a risk,” he proudly explained.

The fun passed in a flash, and soon it was time for the party to end.

They were all in primary school so it wouldn’t do to stay out late.

I was getting ready to leave too, when Enjou and his mother thanked me for coming.

“Thanks to you the party was even livelier. Thank you for coming today, Reika-san.”

“Yukino was overjoyed too,” added Enjou.

Yukino-kun himself came to thank me too.

“Thank you, Reika-oneesan,” he said with an angelic smile.

“Thank you very much for inviting me. I had a wonderful time. Goodbye for now.”

“Come play again.”

“Come again, Reika-neesan.”

“Huhu.”

With the children all gone, only Kaburagi was left.

Apparently he wasn't leaving yet.

"Gokigen'yoh, Kaburagi-sama. I will be taking my leave first," I said, meeting at least the bare minimum of etiquette.

"Yeah," he said without lifting his head.

He was locked in a battle with the puzzles rings.

He was even frowning.

Kaburagi, that one's aimed at experts, so I really don't think you'll get it tonight...

The Enjous saw me off at the doorway.

I was about to get into the car when another car arrived in front of the house.

From inside the car stepped Yuiko-san from the School Festival.

When she noticed me, she gave me a soft smile before walking towards the Enjous.

I got in my car and left.

Chapter 190

The day after the birthday party, Enjou thanked me again in the salon.

“Thanks for yesterday,” Enjou said, “Yukino had a lot of fun thanks to you. He immediately started using your present in his room, you know. When he plugged it in and the lights came on he was surprised by how much it resembled the sea.”

“That makes me very happy to hear. He seemed to really enjoy himself in Okinawa so I thought he liked marine animals.”

“Apparently he does. He keeps talking about how he wants to buy some tropical fish.”

“Is that so.”

“Afterwards when my dad came home we had another celebration with our family, you see. He asked my grandfather for some.”

“My.”

A family gathering, huh...

So that was why I saw Yuiko-san.

Yuiko-san, a candidate for Enjou’s fiancée.

She still had the same otherworldly impression that I saw during the School Festival.

“Speaking of which, Masaya’s still trying to figure out that puzzle ring. He’s gotten really worked up about it. In the end he stayed over, you know. Apparently he stayed up almost until sunrise trying to work it out. That’s why his eyes are all bloodshot and scary today.”

“I... That sounds rough. Did Kaburagi-sama manage to solve it in the end?”

“Apparently he did. He came up to me with this bright smile and showed me the separated pieces. His eyes were still bloodshot though.”

“I see.”

Kaburagi... I don't even have words.

It was just so pathetic.

“Is that why Kaburagi-sama is absent today? He seems like he could use some sleep after all.”

“Nah, the reason he's not here has nothing to do with that. He'll be fine even missing a bit of sleep. He's got stupid amounts of stamina after all.”

“Oh my, ohohoho...”

I couldn't publicly comment.

“Ah, and my mother wanted me to tell you to come over again.”

“Thank you. Perhaps if circumstances permit...”

Touch wood.

Oh my, it's about time for me to go to the Handicrafts Club.

I picked up my bag, said goodbye to everybody, and then left my seat.

Valentine's Day was all the girls were talking about.

It was the right season for chocolate companies to be releasing limited-time products, so everyone was exchanging information about that.

I was excited too.

I had plans to visit Wakaba-chan again, since I still had to learn to make the fondant au chocolat.

The members of my club had been chatting to each other about knitting.

Mn. Not me though.

Still, they seemed to have been having fun.

“Who are you giving yours to this year, Reika-sama?”

At lunch I was heading to the faculty room for some class rep stuff so Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan had come along with me.

I was feeling quite grateful since the two of them weren’t even in my class.

“The same as usual. Just my family and the like.”

“My, only them? Why do you never give any to Kaburagi-sama and Enjou-sama?”

Because I had no reason to.

“What about you two, Serika-san, Kikuno-san?”

“I’m, probably going to go with the Emperor,” said Serika-chan.

“Right? We have to be careful about which chocolate to choose. We can’t pick the wrong one,” agreed Kikuno-chan.

“You have to say chocolat in front of Kaburagi-sama.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

“It was very valuable advice from Reika-sama.”

“I’m happy just to have him accept something from me.”

“I’m the same. But handing it to him personally is important. I’d hate to just leave it in the special bag that he prepares, or on his desk.”

“That sounds a bit like a shrine offering,” I noted.

“Gosh, don’t put it like that, Reika-sama,” complained Serika-chan.

“You should give him something together with us, Reika-sama. It’ll be fun,” Kikuno-chan said. “And if you get to brush against his hands at the time...”

“Kyaah! Gosh, what are you saying, Kikuno-san!”

“My, my, weren’t planning the same thing, Serika-san?”

“Wha-! You promised to keep that a secret!”

While the three of us walked down the hallway, we suddenly noticed Tsuruhana-san’s group coming from the other side.

Without skipping a beat, Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan moved to each of my sides.

“Gokigen’yoh, Reika-sama.”

“Gokigen’yoh, Tsuruhana-san.”

We might have been smiling, but neither of them reached our eyes.

One of her lackeys was holding a Valentine’s special magazine.

Tsuruhana-san noticed my eyes drifting to it.

“What are you plans for Valentine’s, Reika-sama?”

“Nothing in particular,” I replied.

“My! To think that of all people, Reika-sama, you would be spending a lonely Valentine’s!” she said particularly loudly.

This bitch!

“Aren’t you being a bit rude here, Tsuruhana-san?” glared Serika-chan.

“Oh dear, I’m sorry. People have told me I’m too honest sometimes.”

She and her lackeys were snickering audibly.

But suddenly her expression turned serious.

“It’s because you’re always wearing that nonchalant expression of yours that you had your prize stolen from under your nose, you know.”

“What did you just say!?”

Prize stolen from under my nose... Wakaba-chan and Kaburagi?

“The day that a lowly External steals away your throne as the queen isn’t far away, wouldn’t you agree? After all, she’s already won over the hearts of the two most influential people here, hasn’t she?”

“Tsuruhana-san! Watch the way you speak to her!”

“Perhaps the age of a certain someone is already over...”

“Tsuruhana-san! You had better not get ahead of yourself!”

“Unacceptable! How dare you speak to Reika-sama like that!”

Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan looked just about ready to brawl.

It was going to be chaos at this rate.

“Ohohoho,” I laughed. “People do often say that empty vessels make the most sound. I can hear you loud and clear, Tsuruhana-san.”

I smiled in amusement.

“If you want a fight, shall I give you one?”

Youko-sama hadn’t graduated yet, so I could totally do it!

At least I hoped so.

I’d make use of Youko-sama’s power as much as I could!

For a while it seemed like sparks flew between us.

Even if it’s scary, don’t avert your eyes, Reika!

“Hmph. Let’s go, everyone.”

She folded.

Serika-chan and Kikuno-san were still fuming after they walked past and left.

“What the was *that*!? Absolutely unforgivable!”

“Ever since the year started she’s been acting more and more out of hand! She’s asking for war!”

The two of them were boiling with rage.

You’re kind of scary, you two.

Since there were a lot of onlookers, I quickly left.

As I was doing so, I overheard a boy’s comment.

“The three Gorgon sisters are freaking scary...”

Three Gorgon sisters!?

The three of us turned in sync to glare at the source who squealed a little before running away.

Even if you run, you won’t escape us.

I already have your face.

How about I turn *you* to stone as well!

“Reika-sama! We will make sure to punish that insolent boy properly!”

“When I’m through, he won’t have a place in Suiran!”

“Enough, you two. It was just a bit of nonsense. Still, hmm, I think I know what to do with him.”

I sent out a notice to all girls.

Until graduation, nobody was to give that boy a single Valentine’s chocolate; absolutely no courtesy chocolates, to say nothing of romantic chocolates.

He would be part of the village, whether he liked it or not.

Chapter 191

At lunch on Saturday I went to Wakaba-chan's house.

Today I was going to learn to make chocolat au fondant with her.

"It's soooo cold! I think it's gunna snow soon! Your nose is all red, Kisshouin-san. Are you going to be okay?"

"Yes. And the sky is all grey so you may be right."

Today Wakaba-chan had come to meet me at the station.

"I have to apologise again for taking up so much of your free time."

"It's *fiiine*, I said. The only other thing I have is my part-time job after all!"

Wakaba-chan worked lunchtimes at a family restaurant, weekends only.

"You only just came back from work today, no? I hope you did not rush on my account."

"No, no, I always head straight home after changing so don't worry about it. Aren't you way busier than I am?"

"Not at all..."

All I had on these days were extracurricular lessons every fortnight, and cooking lessons with Akimi-san.

When Yukino-kun's birthday party was over I phoned her and told her how much everyone liked it.

Having been worried about it like *she* was the one being judged, she finally let out a sigh of relief to hear that.

I suppose she was though.

Not only were the Enjou family and all their guests going to taste her cooking, but my parents had told her ‘this could make or break our daughter’s reputation’ so it must have been quite some pressure.

I really did feel bad about it.

What would I do if she stopped teaching me because I was such a troublesome student?

Don’t abandon me, Akimi-san!

“It must be rough working part-time. Do you ever get a break?”

“I take time off work before exams.”

“Try not to let the school know.”

“Ah, about that. I actually got permission!”

“Permission? To work?”

“Yeah! Remember how you told me that we weren’t allowed to work? Well, since I work in the kitchen I didn’t think it was going to be a problem, but just to be safe I talked to Mizusaki-kun about it.”

“Mizusaki-kun?”

“Yeah. I thought that the Student Council President was the best one to speak to about these things. He was all like, ‘What the hell are you doing!?’ and got *reaaally* mad at me. ‘Don’t you understand that you could lose your scholarship over this!?’ He was right, of course, and I had a long hard think about it.”

Wakaba-chan hung her head in remorse.

“But then Mizusaki-kun went and obtained permission for me. We said it was to pay for school fees and supplies and somehow got them to agree. Since I was already receiving a scholarship I wasn’t sure if it’d work but thank goodness it did!”

“Good for you.”

“Yeah! I’m so thankful to Mizusaki-kun!” she smiled.

Apparently she thought pretty well of Fellow Stalking Horse.

Just the fact that she discussed it with him meant that she trusted him.

On the one hand, Fellow Stalking Horse who was reliable and dependable.

On the other hand, the Emperor who brought nothing but trouble.

Wow. You’re in trouble, Kaburagi.

“Now I don’t have to worry even if someone realises! I have to thank you too, Kisshouin-san.”

“I do not recall doing anything.”

“That’s not true. I wouldn’t have realised it if you hadn’t told me. Lots of my friends secretly worked during middle school, and a lot of them still did it in high school so I hadn’t paid it much thought.”

“I see. Plenty of people do work in high school.”

“Yeah. Ah, but I’m surprised you knew that, Kisshouin-san. It’s hard to imagine part-time work occurring to anyone from Suiran.”

“Ahh~ Well...”

In my old life, I used to work part-time a lot as welll.

Whenever there was something I wanted and there wasn’t enough money from my parents, for example.

But I guess the idea of working part-time would be a really foreign concept to the girls at Suiran.

You’d expect them to say something like, “Goodness! What is this ‘par time work’ you speak of?”

I had better change the topic before I outed myself.

“By the way, Kaburagi-sama ordered a birthday cake from your place, no?”

“Ooh, how’d you know? He did. I was working that day too, so I couldn’t come home until 2. So to avoid talking about part-time I just told him that I wouldn’t be at home until 2:30 only for him to say that was when he’d come.”

That guy!

He *actually* came late just so he could see Wakaba-chan!

He totally used Yukino-kun’s birthday as an excuse to go see her!

To begin with, who even asked him to pick it up personally?

Using an angel as a pretext to advance his love...

What a guy!

“It was for Enjou-kun’s little brother, wasn’t it? Since his name had ‘yuki(snow)’ in it so he told me he wanted a Swiss meringue snowman.”

“It was very cute.”

“You went to his birthday party? How was it? I hope his little brother enjoyed it.”

“The snowman was so cute that he couldn’t bear to eat it. As for the cake itself, all the children loved it.”

“I see! Thank goodness. I’m a little relieved, you know. I wasn’t sure if rich kids would enjoy it... Hehe.”

“Your otousama’s cakes are delicious, so you should have a little more confidence.”

“Thank you!”

“...And you just called him -kun, no?”

“Ah!”

‘Oh damn!’ said her expression.

Sorry I couldn't ignore this.

"Ummmm~ Since I was talking to Kaburagi-kun that way, Enjou-kun told me to use -kun as well..."

"I see... Try to be more careful at school, please."

"Yes..."

If she seemed close with *both* of them, life was going to get a lot harder for her.

And I was a little surprised.

I had no idea when Enjou became close to Wakaba-chan.

"My siblings are at home today so it might be a bit noisy. Okay, come in."

"Please excuse me."

"I'm home!" she said energetically as she opened the door.

"Welcome back! Ah! You're with the Cornet!"

"Welcome home, Oneechan~ Welcome, Cor-chan."

"Welcome home~"

Standing in her living room were Kanta-kun, as well as the twin brother and sister in Year 5.

"Oi! I told you not to call her that! Her name is Kisshouin-san!" she quickly scolded them, but apparently everyone in her family already thought of me as Cornet.

That was what they probably called me in private, wasn't it.

"Sorry, Kisshouin-san~"

"No need to worry."

Kanta-kun who wasn't fazed at all said,

“Hey, Cornet. You better not do anything stupid today!”

I already know that.

He got so angry last time.

“You must be cold, Kisshouin-san,” said Wakaba-chan. “Let me get you something warm to drink.”

“Thank you.”

That was when her mum slipped out from the storefront.

“Welcome, Co-, Kisshouin-san.”

“Thank you for having me,” I bowed.

“My goodness, you’re a polite one. That’s an ojousama from Suiran for you.”

“She’s the ‘Ohoho Cornet Girl’ after all.”

“Kantaaaa!”

Wakaba-chan brought a vicious fist down onto his head.

‘The Ohoho Cornet Girl’...

Even I couldn’t let that one go.

Get him good, Wakaba-chan.

“Umm, this is some konpeitoh. Please take it.”

“Gosh! Thank you as always. You really don’t have to keep bringing things. We’re not some fancy family,” said her mum.

“I told you last time you didn’t have to worry about this!” scolded Wakaba-chan. “Geez, now we feel bad instead!”

“I know. This is just something I brought from home. Please excuse me for giving you

something that was just lying around.”

“Not at all!” her mum exclaimed. “Well in that case we’ll accept it. Come empty handed next time, okay?”

“Yes.”

Maybe it was ingrained in me now, but it was really hard showing up without a gift.

Still, this time I managed to keep it to some souvenirs I had from Kyoto over New Year’s.

“Oh right. Kisshouin-san, how about I roast some mochi for you?” her mum suddenly asked. “Okay? We can make kinakomochi, agemochi... It’s yummy, you know? What kind do you prefer?”

“Mochi? Then I suppose I am particular to isobeyaki...”

“I see. Then I’ll cook some up for you. The truth is we’ve got a lot of mochi from New Year’s left over. Wakaba, you still haven’t had lunch, right? Help us eat some.”

“Okaay.”

“We’ll have some too!” said Kanta-kun.

Her mum went into the kitchen with the kids.

“Your family eats rectangular mochi, I see.”

“Yep. Doesn’t yours, Kisshouin-san?”

“No, we do, but my mother’s maiden family lives in Kyoto, and over there they eat the round ones.”

“Round ones? Round mochi?” asked Kanta-kun.

“Yes. Also the mochi they put in their ozouni is not roasted, but boiled. And instead of osumashi soup, they use something with a shiromiso base.”

“Eh!? That doesn’t sound like ozouni at all then!” he said.

“I suppose not.”

When I was first served it in Kyoto I was like, ‘Eh!?’

I lived in Tokyo in my old life, so I was really used to the way we did things.

The world of cuisine was deep and profound, wasn’t it.

“Is there anything I can help with?” I asked.

“It’s fine. You can go choose which toppings you want, though.”

“Toppings?”

It was mochi.

Wasn’t it pretty much just seaweed, kinako dust, and red bean soup?

“I’ll go with cod roe and cheese!” he said.

“Cod roe and cheese?”

You could even make mochi like *that*!?

Wasn’t this the best opportunity to express my creativity then!?

“Stay out of the kitchen, Cornet.”

Kanta-kun had very little faith in me, it seemed.

Chapter 192

“Heyy, Kanta-kun. What if I put yoghurt on mochi?”

“Give it up. Here. Some cod-ro-e-and-cheese mochi for you, Cornet.”

“*Thank* you! Wahh, so good! Hey, Kanta-kun? What if I put jam on the mochi?”

“Sounds disgusting. Here, mochi pizza.”

“Waah, this is my first time having a pizza mochi! It was so good!”

Kanta-kun had turned down all of my ideas. But all of the things that Kanta-kun made for me were delicious, so I guess it was fine?

Still, it was actually pretty hard trying to match sweet things with the mochi.

If it was shiratama dango instead would it be easier?



Hmmm...

“Hey Cornet, do you ever eat them normally?”

“I do eat them normally. But I just wonder about more unique ways to do them sometimes...”

“Yeah, but why. Like, could you honestly say that you’d enjoy eating jam or yoghurt on mochi?”

“Uu...”

“Food isn’t your toy.”

“Guh...”

There was nothing I could say to that.

“To begin with, why do you always try and put weird spins on these? It was the same with that cake as well.”

Uu, that was because...

“..out... working...”

“What?”

“...Nothing.”

...I daydreamed that if I came up with my own original recipe, I could get rich without working.

Then my daydream got even bigger.

I would be this amateur chef who posted her original recipes on the internet.

Then people started talking about me, which would be when I published my own cooking book.

The media all started featuring me and I’d suddenly find myself a celebrity.

That was when a hot young actor with an interest in cooking would sudden invite me to have a chat!

The two of us would hit it off.

Eventually it turned into love.

But the love between the popular young actor, and Japan’s foremost young lady was not to be.

The people around us tried to tear us apart.

While I was locked at home and I spent every day crying, one day I overheard my family talking about a political marriage!

I wanted to see him.

But I couldn't.

Eventually I made up my mind.

I would abandon my family!

It wasn't only me risking her future though.

I slipped out at night to meet with him.

While throwing off my pursuers I ran onto a road where I was hit by a truck!

Nobody could find a blood donor for me, but just when it was about to be too late, shockingly that young actor had the same blood-type as me!

For the girl he loved, he let them take almost all the blood he could spare.

In tears, my family thanked him.

"No," he said, "As long as it's for her, I don't care how many times I risk my life!"

I was safe from death now.

In my deluxe suite, I watched him on t.v. holding an emergency press conference.

"I have somebody I love. Before I'm an actor, I'm a man in love!"

I couldn't see him properly through my tears!

Since he had saved my life, my family finally approved of him.

As for his agency, they allowed it as well after seeing his resolve.

All of Japan blessed our pure love, and as we had our wedding in an old European castle, a double rainbow spanned the sky as exchanged our vows.

What a touching finale!

—And that was how my grandiose delusions went.

“What happened, Cornet? You’re all smirking now. It’s creepy.”

“Eh?”

Kanta-kun looked at me in suspicion.

Apparently I had been smirking while I thought back to my delusions.

I decided to be more careful while daydreaming in public...

But man, did I used to love that rare blood-type cliché.

AB Negative and that.

Was it because it was nice being special?

Incidentally my actual blood type was the second most common in Japan.

“Anyway, just follow the recipe for *all* cooking!”

“Okay...”

He was being pretty bossy for a 1st year middle-schooler but since he helped his parents and sister with the shop he could cook even as a child.

I respect you, Kanta-kun.

The isobeyaki you made for me was exquisite was well!

After eating the delicious mochi, I began learning how to make the chocolat au fondant with Wakaba-sensei.

Today not only was Kanta-kun joining us, but the twins were watching as well.

It made me a little more nervous than usual.

I get it, okay?

I'll follow the recipe already.

Kanta-kun's looking pretty strict, after all.

"First we sieve the flour, okay?" said Wakaba-chan.

"Yes," I replied.

"Cornet, you better do this right," warned Kanta-kun.

"Yes..." I replied.

"Do you best, Cornet!" said the twins.

"Next we'll melt the chocolate and batter in the warm water."

"Yes."

Warming it up with water, huh.

"You know," I began, "In the past I failed to understand the importance of warming it with water like this. Since I figured it was just melting and casting it, I put it in a pot and just heated it directly."

"Eh!?"

"What the hell were you doing!?"

The Takamichi siblings looked like they had discovered some kind of impossible creature.

"What happened then...?" Wakaba-chan asked.

"It burnt in the saucepan and the resulting chocolate was gritty and terrible. Heating it up with water is a very important step," I lectured.

“We already know that...” they replied.

I had planned to break the ice with the story but Kanta-kun’s gaze just got stricter.

Maybe I shouldn’t have said that...

I let my guard down because I was too relaxed here.

Maybe because it reminded me of my old life somehow.

“Done!”



The outside was crumbly while the inside was gooey.

It hadn’t taken all that long to make, but the chocolat au fondant was *sooo* good!

Wakaba-chan had an amazing recipe!

“And the powdered sugar looks like snow, so it is good on the eyes too,” I noted in admiration.

The chocolate cheesecake we made last time was great too, but today’s creation was leagues ahead!

This was definitely going to be this year’s Valentine’s chocolate!

I decided to teach Sakura-chan and Aoi-chan the recipe too.

“See!” Kanta-kun boasted. “Look at how delicious it is when you don’t add weird shit!”

“Kanta!” his sister scolded him.

I had learnt an important lesson...

It was night-time when it was time to leave.

Looking up at the night sky, I realised that it had suddenly started snowing.

“Are you going to be okay? Want an umbrella?”

“No, thank you. When I reach my station I shall call for a car.”

Since I was keeping these visits a secret I couldn’t get picked up from here.

But just a bit of snow was fine.

“Thank you for putting up with me today. I must have caused you a lot of trouble.”

“Not at all! I still haven’t paid you back at all, Kisshouin-san!”

“You mean the uniform and the shoes? It was really nothing much, so please forget it.”

“I can’t do that. They were so expensive. I still wonder if I shouldn’t try and pay some of it back.”

“Ehh!?”

I had no idea she was trying to do that!

I mean, they were all bird-pooped and all.

“They were only about a hundred thousand Yen though...”

“Eh? It’s more than that, Kisshouin-san. You don’t know the cost of the uniforms you’re using? And besides, even if it was a hundred thousand that’s a lot to me.”

I suppose so.

A hundred thousand was a lot to me too, though.

Wakaba-chan’s expression turned serious.

“Ummm, you know, it’s a bit hypocritical of me to say this, but I’ve been thinking that maybe you should cherish the things your parents give you a bit more.”

“Eh...?”

“The uniform you gave me was something bought with money that your dad worked hard for. I’d feel a bit bad for him if you didn’t treasure it a bit more...”

“...”

“Sorry, that was rude of me. But I know how hard my mum and dad work, so the things they buy for me are precious to me. I mean, it’s hard making a hundred thousand, you know?”

“Yes...”

In my past life I would never have forgotten how lucky I was to have that money.

When had I become numb to it?

Unlike Wakaba-chan’s dad, I never saw Otousama working of course, so maybe that factored into it.

I never even bothered to find out how much the uniform they bought me cost.

I just accepted it without a thought, because it was natural.

Even though Otousama had worked for that money.

What on earth was I doing.

This wasn’t being humble or reliable at all.

“Are you okay, Kisshouin-san?” she asked me worriedly.

I had fallen silent for a while.

“Oh yes. I am.”

“Sorry for saying something weird. I just...”

“No. I was in the wrong. Thank you. I have realised it now. But please forget about the uniform. I have many spares, after all.”

I kept thinking about her words on the train ride home.

When I got home, Otousama was relaxing on the sofa.

“Otousama!”

“Oh, welcome home, Reika.”

“I am back.”

I walked over and sat down right next to him.

“Oh? What’s wrong? Somebody’s clingy today.”

“...Thank you for everything, Otousama.”

“What’s the matter, Reika?”

Otousama seemed confused.

“I realised again that it is only because you work hard every day that I live as luxuriously as I do. My school fees and everything I wear was bought with money you earned through work. Thank you. And sorry that I always spend so much without realising how much you labour for that money...”

“Reika... You’re such a good girl! Just buy anything you want, Reika! I’ll pay for anything you want! Let’s go on a shopping spree tomorrow!”

Eh? That wasn’t what I was trying to say at all...

But the Tanuki was so ecstatic that he wasn’t going to listen anymore.

Are you trying to earn more points with your daughter by showering her with gifts, Tanuki?

Ah, no, no, I was being grateful to Otousama.

Right, right.

“Otousama, today I was learning to bake a cake for Valentine’s day. I will try my best to make something delicious for you on the day, so please look forward to it!”

To date, all of the things I gave Otousama was just made on the side while I baked for Oniisama.

But this year I would make sure to put my heart into it!

“Ah, you know, this year your Otousama is stuck going to that compulsory Human Dry Dock medical examination...”

“My! That sounds so rough! Then from today onwards I will make healthy meals for you!”

I could get Akimi-san to teach me how to make healthy food.

I wonder what kind of dishes there were.

Stuff like tofu steaks or something?

It sounded tough, but I’d do my best.

It was for Otousama, after all!

“My Reika, just your feelings are enough, so...”

“Worry not, Otousama. From today onwards I will show my gratitude by making sure you are as fit as a fiddle! Leave it to me!”

Oh geez, Otousama.

He seemed so moved by his daughter that he was in tears.

Oh, I know.

Maybe I could become a nutritionist in the future.

Then I come up with a revolutionary nutritional plan.

Renowned across the country, Kisshouin Reika, the beautiful nutritionist.

Suddenly, an offer by a superstar athlete to work as his dietician.

Under my meticulous plan, his results begin to skyrocket.

Before he knew it, his gratitude had turned to love...

To be continued...

Chapter 193

The snow that appeared Saturday night kept falling well into Sunday.

Although it had stopped by the time Monday had come rolling around, looking out the window of my car on the way to school, it was plainly obvious that it *had* snowed, and parts of the road were still frozen over.

Oh. A salaryman just slipped.

How dangerous.

With this much snow around I wondered if Enjou and Kaburagi were going to build Yukino-kun another snowman.

I arrived early, having left early to take into account the road conditions.

Class Rep was already there.

“Good morning, Kisshouin-san.”

“Gokigen’yoh, Class Rep. Somebody is early today.”

“Yeah. It’s been snowing after all. Plus, the exams are coming soon, so I was thinking of studying.”

“My, what a model student you are. Perhaps I should follow your example and study now as well.”

After all, I was left out of the top 30 for my end of year exams. It was about time that I got a bit serious.

“Oh, right. Remember how I told you Honda-san gave me chocolates for Valentine’s?”

“Did you now?”

“I *did*. Anyway, since the two of them said they’d make handmade chocolates for us, I

thought I should return the favour by handmaking some for them.”

“Eh!? Handmade!?”

I turned to him in shock.

“Well, I thought it was a good chance to try. Anyway, I was thinking about what to make and I thought Sachertorte would be nice.”

“Sachertorte!?”



The cake consists of a dense chocolate cake with a thin layer of apricot jam on top, coated in dark chocolate icing on the top and sides. It is traditionally served with unsweetened whipped cream.

What a crazy hard choice for a first-timer!

“Is that not a little difficult...?” I was about to ask but Class Pres showed me a picture on his phone.

It was a wonderful example of a Sachertorte.

“I’ve never baked a cake before, but it turned out pretty well, I think.”

“I see,” I deadtoned.

Apparently the maiden was even equipped with dessert-making skills.

Even though I had been doing this for years and was only just recently seeing results.

Disgusting.

I didn’t know how good Miharu-chan was, but I had to wonder how you’d feel if a boy gave you better-made chocolates than you could manage yourself.

At the very least, *I* would get an inferiority complex.

“People at Suiran prefer buying expensive chocolates, so perhaps you should reconsider,” I told him. “Besides, if you trade your home cooking with her you are only a single mistake away from being treated as her girl friend.”

“Eh-, girl friend!? I really wouldn’t want that...”

Class Rep was flustered now.

“Or were you intending on confessing to Honda-san with that Sachertorte? In that case I will not stop you, but...”

“Ehh!? No! I haven’t been thinking about confessing at all yet!” he exclaimed, red-faced. “I just wanted to thank her!”

“In that case buying a few expensive limited-edition chocolates, as well as some accessories like a handkerchief or some gloves would achieve something closer to your desired effect. Well, some people do say that handkerchiefs are a sign of a goodbye, so perhaps something else.”

“I see. As expected of a Love Guru. I better tell Iwamuro-kun too!”

“Besides some small gifts, I had been happy enough to receive a small bouquet in the past, but if you go down that route you had better have somebody take care of it during class. Otherwise it may have wilted by the time school is out. Perhaps it would be better to forget about those for now.”

“Yeah, you might be right. But how did you learn all these things about romance anyway?”

I learnt about the presents from Imari-sama, and everything else from the shoujo manga I read in my last life.

“I’ve been talking to Iwamuro-kun about it, but I think my luck in romance has been better after touching that reversed curl of yours. Thank you for always blessing me.”

Apparently in his head I was one of those bronze ox statues you rubbed for good luck.

People believe in the strangest things.

But I got my hair fixed at a beauty salon so they were all curled the right way now.

In exchange I grew an urna!

“Say, Class Rep, if some strange girl you had never spoken to suddenly gave you a Valentine’s chocolate, how would you feel?”

“Eh-, strange girl!? Hmmm, I’d be happy, but I guess a little troubled too if I didn’t know her...”

“As I thought...”

For an instant I had considered gaining the courage to give one to Naru-kun from the library, but since it would probably only make me look like a stalker I decided against it.

I guess the Village Chief was having another boring Valentine’s.

I wonder if there were any new applicants to the village.

We’re still taking new people, you know?

Ru’ne-chan and the others arrived so I apologised to Class Rep for disturbing his studies and said goodbye.

“Reika-sama’, gokigen’yoh. It’s cold today, isn’t it?”

“Gokigen’yoh. It is indeed. I had trouble getting out of bed.”

“Me too~”

Still, everyone came to school in a car so there was only the walk from the car park.

“It’s got to be rough for people walking to school today.”

“I have to agree. I saw quite a few people losing their footing today while being driven to school.”

“Wow, that’s dangerous.”

Before long, Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan arrived as well, and the conversation turned to excited talk about the snow.

Suddenly another girl from my group ran into the classroom.

“It’s terrible, Reika-sama! Takamichi-san got out of Kaburagi-sama’s car again!”

“Eh?”

“Kaburagi-sama!?”

Apparently right after Kaburagi and Wakaba-chan parted, everyone swarmed her to ask what was going on.

And according to Wakaba-chan, he had spotted her on the way to school. Rather than let her ride the train and then walk through the snow, he told her to get in instead.

“How many times has that been now? That that girl has been in Kaburagi-sama’s car,” frowned Kikuno-chan.

Everyone else muttered about how shameless she was too.

But I was focused on something else.

Before she rode the train and walk through the snow?

Didn’t this mean he had been lying in wait in her neighbourhood then...?

Scaryy!

Stalker!!

Scaryyy!!!

“Could we speak, Kisshouin-san?” somebody asked.

The girls in the classroom erupted in squeals.

It had been Enjou, standing by the classroom door.

“Is something the matter?” I asked, having joined him in the hallway.

We were still being showered by curious gazes.

“The truth is that Yukino was hospitalised last night,” he smiled helplessly.

“Ehh!? Yukino-kun!?”

“Yeah, but we admitted him more as a precaution than anything else. It’s nothing serious.”

“How terrible. Being in hospital is such an unpleasant experience.”

“Ahh~ Well, I guess. Anyway, sorry to bother but do you think you could write him a ‘get well’ message before school ends?”

“A message?”

“Yeah. He’s been whining about the hospital quite a bit this time since he only had a minor asthma attack. Yukino’s been in a bad mood, so I thought you could cheer him up.”

“My...”

It had to be so rough on a child.

“If just a letter from someone like me could help cheer him up a little, I will write as many as it takes!”

“Thanks, and I really am sorry for the bother. I’ll definitely make this up to you.”

“No, no. I am simply doing this for Yukino-kun, so no thanks are needed.”

I went to my locker to get my letter set and began writing.

After school, he thanked me politely again when I handed him the letter.

Apparently he was skipping the salon today and heading straight to the hospital.

While we spoke about Yukino-kun, I ended up seeing him off at the carpark.

“See you tomorrow then. Thanks for the letter.”

“Not at all. Gokigen’yoh, Enjou-sama.”

He waved at me and then got in his car.

Hmmm...?

The person in the car with him, didn’t she look an awful lot like Yuiko-san?

Chapter 194

Takamichi Kanta

I have an older sister.

Neechan is four years older than me.

When she was in her last year of middle school she suddenly started going on about taking the examinations for this school for rich kids.

The famous Suiran Academy.

It caused a huge fuss.

My parents and her teacher had thought that she was going to a public school after all.

Why Suiran!?

In fact, her teacher told her, “With your grades I think you could get in on the scholarship, but that place isn’t like other schools, you know? Is that okay with you, Takamichi-san?”

Mum and Dad were worried that she wouldn’t fit in there as well.

Neechan insisted.

“If I get the scholarship then I can go there for free. Plus, if my marks are good enough, they’ll even give me money that I won’t have to return. The curriculum is leagues more fulfilling than other schools too, so I *want* to go there,” she explained.

My parents weren’t having any of it of course.

“Don’t worry about the school fees. Just go to a school where you’ll fit in.”

School fees, huh. I suppose we did have quite a few siblings.

But Neechan didn't change her mind.

"It isn't just the school fees. I want to see a new world and experience something different. Plus, the uniforms are cute."

That last reason was a pretty girly one.

Since she was so determined, in the end our parents consented.

"Well, if you insist," they relented.

And so she ended up taking the examinations.

Deciding on your school based on the uniforms though...

I really don't get girls.

According to Mum, Neechan has always had a strong sense of curiosity.

One time she chased a butterfly all the way into the next town, and they only found out where she was when a police officer contacted them.

Another time she had an insect guide. She went around all day looking at bugs with a magnifying glass, and ended up collapsing to heatstroke.

When it was a star guide instead, she stayed on the veranda stargazing all night long and ended up bedridden with a fever.

Neechan loves those encyclopaedic picture guides.

Anyway, since Mum figured Suiran was another case of her curiosity flaring up, she decided to let her be.

After Neechan made it in she tried on the uniform.

"Does it suit me? Do I look like an ojousama?"

I don't know how many times she asked that.

She only left the mirror when we finally replied, "It does, it's cute."

But after that she started going,

“Did you know they say gokigen’yoh at Suiran? Kanta, Gokigen’yoh.”

She wouldn’t stop, and it was annoying, but Mum told me to deal with it.

“She made it past a very difficult examination to be accepted there, so just bear with it.”

So bear with it I did.

Neechan had just begun ecstatically attending Suiran when she suddenly said to me:

“That school is even crazier than I imagined.”

“What’s so crazy about it?”

“Hmmm, all sorts of things. Really makes you realise that out there there are worlds like that too. Yeah...” she nodded to herself.

I’m still wondering what’s so crazy, damnit!

“And man, seeing the real thing sure was different to my own ‘gokigen’yoh’. It sounded completely natural coming from them. Whenever I say it there’s some part of me embarrassed about what the heck I’m doing, you know? But in that world it’s a matter of fact, isn’t it. And they throw about topics about high society so fast that I don’t know what’s what. It was like listening to another language,” she said in wonder.

Hearing that just made us worried.

“Are you going to be okay, Wakaba?” Mum asked. “Are you sure you shouldn’t have gone to another school?”

But Neechan wasn’t worried at all.

“Ah well, I’m sure I’ll get used to it sooner or later. Once I do, I’ll be a splendid ojousama as well!”

“Is this the face of an ojousama to *you*?”

That got me a punch.

That hurts, damnit!

“Is your school really all that amazing?”

“Yeah. I hadn’t heard of half the items on the cafeteria menu. I gave one of the soups a go, and it came out *cold*! At first I was like, ‘*Ah! they forgot to heat it up!*’ but it turns out that it’s meant to be like that. Vichyssoise is this cold, potato soup. Vichyssoise. And even though we were speaking Japanese they all pronounced the ‘v’. It was crazy. Vee, Kanta. Vee.”

“Enough already!”

“Man. I had no idea food in a school cafeteria could be so good. Of course it was as expensive as it was surprising, though. Since I can’t eat there every day I think it’d be nice if I treated myself there whenever I get some money.”

“Oneechan! I want some too!”

“Me too!”

The twins joined the conversation out of nowhere.

“Alright. I guess I’ll try making it at home sometime!”

What was good about cold soup?

In the days following, my sister would come home influenced by something that happened there.

The time when she learnt flower arrangement she came home and decorated the foyer.

The time when she learnt tea ceremony she began mixing tea in a tea bowl.

“Today I learnt this flower arrangement type called moribana. At the start you pick the grandest, longest branch and place it right in the middle of the kenzan stand~ Right here, see? They call it the shin branch. When you’re done with that, the next one is the soe branch and put stick it in here~”

“When you drink the tea you move the brush over like this, and take a sip while avoiding it.”

“When you pick up your chopsticks you have to grab them from above with your right hand, hold them in your left, and then swap them back to your right hand.”

Each time Neechan showed off something she learnt to the family, everyone oo’d and ah’d in admiration.

“As expected of Suiran,” they’d all praise.

“Yep,” she would laugh.

“Your dad and I were worried that you’d have a hard time there. It’s a relief to see you enjoying yourself.”

“It was one culture shock after another, and they have so many customs too. But I’m having fun, and I’m learning a lot there.”

“Neechan, did you make any friends at a place like that?”

“I’m surrounded by young masters and ojousamas so I don’t have a lot, but I definitely do have friends so don’t worry.”

I hoped that was true.

Ever since Neechan had entered high school, she had begun working a part-time job.

Apparently her scholarship money was ‘for the future’, so she needed a source of pocket money.

“I’ll be out and working by the time it’s your turn for university, so I’ll take care of the fees, okay?” she once told me, but I was going to get a part-time job in high school anyhow.

Neechan’s everyday life was busy, from studying to her job.

But even in middle school, friends from around the area would come over to play.

There didn't seem to be any sign of that here, so I knew that Mum and Dad were still secretly worried.

Neechan was hit by a car during summer break.

The culprit was somebody in her year at Suiran.

Although her bicycle had been completely dented at the front, Neechan had only suffered some bruises and scrapes.

When that schoolmate had brought her to the hospital, the examination diagnosed her with no serious injuries.

Anyway, he came to our house to apologise that day, with a huge bouquet and a lawyer in tow.

We had first realised when my little sister excitedly notified us about "some kind of hearse car" parked in front of our house.

"Your cherished daughter has been injured because of me. I sincerely apologise and have no excuse," the classmate bowed low when he brought Neechan back from the hospital.

Neechan had told us that it was nothing serious, but ordinarily Mum and Dad would still be worried and furious.

Instead, seeing the boy refuse to stop bowing sent them into a fluster instead.

It sent Neechan into an even greater one, actually.

"K-Kaburagi-sama! Please raise your head! Look! Right as rain, see?!"

"My daughter is right. You brought her to the hospital as well, and we can all see that you genuinely feel sorry."

"And you're our daughter's schoolmate so we weren't thinking of pressing charges at all."

After a lot of convincing from the three of them, he finally lifted his head.

As it turned out, he was super handsome.

“Then let’s talk about reparations,” said his lawyer, but my parents refused them on the grounds that they wouldn’t feel at ease with it.

In the end we only agreed to take this huge envelope of “get-well money” from them.

“We will also reimburse you for the bicycle, and the medical fees are a matter of course,” said her schoolmate.

“Ehh!? Just this get-well money is more than enough!”

“That will not do. This and that are two different matters.”

Neechan tried to reason with him.

“Kaburagi-sama, umm, you’ve already paid for the hospital *and* medical bills today. Since I don’t have any broken bones, I don’t think I’ll be going to the hospital either so there won’t be any medical bills to *pay*...”

“Unacceptable. You have to keep going until the doctor says that you’ve fully recovered. Nobody can say that there won’t be medical complications,” he replied severely.

“I understand...” she replied meekly.

When it was time for him to leave, he told us he was buying all the cakes in the store.

“I’d feel bad for the other customers who came here to buy things, so just your feelings are enough~!” she stopped him in a panic.

After the boy and his lawyer left, Dad had to go back to the store.

Everyone else was still gathered in the living room.

“For a high schooler, that boy really has his act together...”

“Yeah...”

“Do you think we breached some etiquette by serving him barley tea, Mum?”

“You’re asking that now?”

“That oniisan was so cool!”

“His car was cool too!”

“That’s the car that hit Neechan, yanno?”

“Oh no, that wasn’t the car that hit me. It wasn’t any less expensive though.”

“Are you for real!?”

They had *more* than one car like that!?

“The car that hit me got a bit scratched after all. I was actually worried about what we’d do if they asked for compensation, you know?”

“It’s good that he was a decent person, wasn’t it,” my Mum commented.

“By the way, Neechan,” I asked, “How come you were being so polite to him? Isn’t he your age? And why the -sama?”

“Oneechan, was he your friend?”

“Whoaa, no way! That’s somebody special even for a Suiran student, you know! If it wasn’t for the accident I’d have graduated without ever saying a word to him!”

“Huh. He was some kind of big shot then?” I asked.

“He is. We’ve got two, ah, three...? people at our school that everyone acknowledges as special. Kaburagi-sama is one of them.”

That boy who ‘everybody acknowledged as special’ ended up visiting Neechan a bunch more times during the summer break to drive her to the hospital.

He even got her an expensive Italian bicycle which Neechan promptly remodelled into a city bike with a basket.

What a waste.

But yeah, people from Suiran really were different to your average high schooler.

When I got back from school, something crazy was waiting for me in the lounge room.

Her hair was curled like chocolate cornets or something, and she even had a ribbon attached.

It was like somebody had pulled an ojousama out of some manga or drama.

But for some reason she was wearing one of Neechan's T-shirts and shorts.

It couldn't have looked any worse on her.

Neechan had made some yakisoba for us when she came back.

She asked the Cornet girl if she wanted seconds.

Apparently Cornet had eaten before we got here.

"No, I am... Well, if you insist then perhaps just a bite, since you offered," was her reply.

She ended up eating with us.

"You've got nori on your face, you know?"

"Oh goodness."

She even went 'ohoho' as she wiped the nori I pointed out.

'Ohoho' I said.

Who knew there were really people who laughed that way in real life...

So she was both an 'ohoho' and a 'Cornet'.

After that day, Cornet visited us on occasion.

Each time she came over she ended up eating something.

And her “just a bite” was always a huge serving.

She always said ‘then, just a bite’ but would end up demolishing the whole plate.

And whenever Neechan asked if she wanted seconds the reply was always something like, “No, I am quite full. Although if you insist then perhaps just a bite...” and she’d end up eating even more.

“Hey Neechan, even though Cornet always eats until the end, why does she always refuse once first?”

“Hmmm, maybe it’s etiquette for an ojousama?”

I don’t get it.

Actually the other day she ate quite a lot of the mochi too.

Since she was eating so well, I thought she might be hungry.



Chikara udon is mochi rice cakes on an udon dish.

“Want me to throw some chikara udon together?” I asked, but this time she really refused.

“Perhaps next time,” she said before muttering, “Udon zousui would be nice too...”

Was she planning on adding zousui to her chikara udon?

There was honestly no helping her.

“Hey, Neechan. Cornet is your friend, right?”

“I’ve told you her name isn’t Cornet, it’s Kisshouin-san! But my friend, huh... I’d like to

think so at least. She's actually as amazing a person as Kaburagi-kun is. But, Kisshouin-san is always helping me out, you know? She might have actually proven to be the most trustworthy person there."

"Huh. Then I suppose Cornet's welcome in my home!"

"Cocky brat. And she's Kisshouin-san to you!"

"Cornet-chan's a good girl. Always so polite," added Mum. "Your mum can rest at ease knowing you have a friend like that."

"You're calling her that too, Mum...? But mmn, sorry for worrying you. I've got friends there, and I'm having a lot of fun."

"I'm glad to hear that. So? What's Cornet-chan like at school?"

"She's a pure-bred Suiran, I have to say~ Lots of girls really look up to her. They treat her like the ideal girl, I guess?"

"Buhaha!? *Cornet*!? The same Cornet who's been eating yakisoba, or curry, or mochi every time she comes to our house!? The one that actually laughs 'ohoho'? The Ohoho Cornet Girl?"

"*Kanta*! But well, even I had no idea she'd be so easy to get along with... I think I'd like to get to know her better."

"Hmmmm~ Alright then."

"What about Kaburagi-kun?" Mum asked. "Is he your boyfriend, Wakaba?"

"Haah!? No way! Don't say stupid things!" shouted Neechan.

"Ehh? But he keeps coming to visit you, and he even came here to give you a present on Christmas."

"Seriously! Stop it! If by some tiny chance a person from Suiran overheard that..."

"Oh my, should we keep it a secret from Cornet-chan too?"

"I've already told Kisshouin-san but... But just don't say these things outside, okay! You

never know who might overhear! Not just you Mum, everyone else too, okay!?"

She seemed awfully serious, so we reluctantly replied.

"Then who was the boy you went to your New Year's shrine visit with? Remember? The one that you showed me the picture of."

"He's just a friend I'm in the Student Council with! And didn't I show you pictures of my other friends!?"

"But that boy was so cool."

"He's! Just! A! Friend! I'm done with this conversation! Done!"

"Your dad's been worried too, you know? He's been asking me if you've gotten yourself a boyfriend."

"Neechan, are you aiming to marry into money?"

"I'm *nottt*!"

Whatever the case, Kaburagi-san definitely liked Neechan.

I mean it was on Christmas Eve.

Would you go out of your way like that for a normal friend?

At first I laughed at giving a high schooler a present like that, but then Cornet told us about how famous and expensive it was and shocked the crap out of Neechan and I.

Tens of thousands of yen for a stuffed toy!?

It was bloody insane.

The teddy bear had actually come with a coat and a heart necklace.

My little sister wanted the necklace since she thought it was cute.

Since she was in elementary, Neechan figured it would be fine even though it was for a toy.

It was pretty sparkly for a toy, so she quickly came to adore it.

Even the doll's accessories were crazy good!

Anyway, it had decorated the house until the end of the year, and was sitting in Neechan's room now.

I wonder if Neechan was planning on giving Kaburagi-san some Valentine's chocolates this year.

I was pretty sure he was waiting for them.

Speaking of Valentine's, I was really damned worried about Cornet's...

Was that girl going to be alright?

She'd better follow the recipe properly!

Chapter 195

The day after seeing off Enjou and who I thought was Yuiko-san, Enjou himself came and thanked me again.

“Yukino was overjoyed. He even started talking about how he was going to write you a reply. I’ll bring it to you tomorrow.”

“My! I would be overjoyed too if I managed to help his mood even a little! I apologise for not being able to write anything meaningful.”

“Don’t say that. He had a lot of fun reading about your recent endeavours with dessert making.”

“I truly wrote nothing but trifling nonsense...”

“Speaking of the dessert making, could it be that you’re preparing for Valentine’s?”

“Well, yes...”

It was kind of embarrassing to be asked that...

It made you seem like you were really excited about it...

“I see. Have you already got a list of who you’ll be giving them to?”

“Eh?”

Why was he asking me this?

“Mmmn, well, I think that brat Yukino is hoping for some from you.”

“Eh!? Truly!?”

“He won’t out and say it though, but yeah~ Ever since reading your letter he’s been asking us what we think you’re making. Normally if you hear that a girl is making desserts you’d think of Valentine’s, right?”

“I do believe that there are people who make desserts even beyond Valentine’s Day. I have thought about giving Yukino-kun some chocolate before, so I am glad to hear that he wants some. The issue is that my handmade desserts are not good enough to share beyond my family. I would rather buy some cute white chocolate that suits his name better.”

“Thanks. I guess his hopes aren’t unfounded now. It’s pretty rough being a guy, you know? You wait, and you wait, and the more sure you are about getting chocolates, the bigger the shock is when you don’t.”

“Huhuhu. Considering the stacks of chocolates that you receive each year, I am sure that such a feeling is foreign to you two.”

“Well, who knows.”

Oh my.

Look at the smug smile of a popular guy on his mug.

Tsk.

But still, he had a point.

Whenever Valentine’s day came around I was particularly glad I wasn’t born a guy.

Considering my current record with love I probably wouldn’t get a single chocolate...

My, my, I need to expand the Forever Alone village.

Reviving this village is going to be a tough job.

A few days later Yukino-kun’s reply letter came, along with desserts from their okaasama as thanks.

I had to quickly write a reply!

The closer to Valentine’s it got, the more Wakaba-chan was harrassed by Kaburagi and Fellow Stalking Horse’s fans.

She was their biggest rival after all.

I was worried about her so I gathered my courage and called her.

She told me that she had put a lock on her locker, and she had been keeping her shoebox locked since the last incident.

She never left anything at her desk before going home either.

Since she wasn't getting anything vandalised anymore, she assured me that there wasn't any real harm.

"Still," she added, "when I dropped my rubber and went to pick it up, I was really surprised to find an ofuda stuck underneath my chair."

Ehhhh!? Was that a curse or something!? *Scary!*

Wakaba-chan needed to go get exorcised!

"What did you do?"

"Huh? I peeled it off and threw it in the garbage of course."

You're too strong, Wakaba-chan...

It was pandemonium at Suiran on Valentine's day.

Queues of girls had lined up outside of Kaburagi, Enjou, and Fellow Stalking Horse's classes.

Hordes of chocolate-holding girls from the middle school section had come too.

Since it had nothing to do with me, though, I was actually having a lot of fun watching them.

At the moment I was wondering how much chocolate it would be by the end of the day.

The particularly bold girls were handing them to Enjou and Kaburagi directly.

Serika-chan and the others had obviously given chocolates to them.

It was nice that they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

What I brought to school was mostly chocolates to exchange with girls, and the chocolates for Yukino-kun.

I was heading to the Petit Salon after school.

Or so I had planned, but after the classes ended, Enjou stopped me.

“Sorry, Kisshouin-san. Yukino went to hospital today, so he left earlier.”

“Ehh!?”

What the heck!?

I should have given them earlier then!

“Then, what should I do with these...?”

I held out the chocolates for Yukino-kun.

“You could give them tomorrow, or I could hand them over for you today...”

“It would be better for him to receive these today, I think. In that case, could I trouble you to deliver these?”

“Yeah. Sure. Sorry about making you do this.”

“Not at all.”

Just as I handed these to him, I had a suddenly realisation.

Didn't this look like I was handing chocolates to Enjou on Valentine's day!?

Oh crap!

“Enjou-sama! You must absolutely deliver these chocolate to your esteemed brother! These chocolates are for your esteemed brother!” I said loudly, putting stress on who they were for.

Enjou seemed to understand my worries because he was smiling in enjoyment.

Buzz off!

I turned around to hurry home only to spot Kaburagi loitering like he was looking for someone.

Just like Wakaba-chan and Kanta-kun had taught me, I followed the recipe to the letter.

When I tried one of the resulting fondant au chocolats, it tasted exactly the same as the one at Wakaba-chan's!

So, so delicious!

So I was wrong about home made food being unique experiences after all!

I hurried to Otousama to hand him his.

Taste it, Otousama! Taste the fruits of my labour!

"Thank you, Reika. I'm really happy," he said.

For whatever reason he was being really slow about it.

Then he broke off a dainty piece with his fork.

Huh? Are you a girl? Go for a big chunk.

When he finally put it into his mouth, Otousama's eyes shot wide open.

"What *happened*, Reika!? These are *delicious*!"

...Your mouth slipped, Tanuki.

"Otousama, what is that supposed to mean?"

"Ahh... I mean, you've gotten really skilled at making desserts. Did you learn this from the Narutomi family's Akimi-san as well?"

In a completely different picture to before, Otousama was happily gobbling it down.

“...No. I learnt this from another friend.”

“Oh? A friend from Suiran?”

“Well, yes...”

“Was it one of the girls that came to our house a few times?” asked Okaasama as she sat down beside him. “The ones from primary. I think their names were Serika-san and...”

Okaasama didn’t eat sweet things often in consideration for her looks, so she never touched any of the chocolates I made.

In any case, I was a little surprised that Okaasama still remembered the names of my friends.

They had only come over a few times in total...

“It was not them, Okaasama. This is somebody I interacted with during club activities.”

I decided it would be better not to mention her.

Plus, I never said it was somebody *in* my club.

As a club, we definitely interacted with the Student Council.

“I see. A girl from a nice family, then? Don’t hang out with anybody strange.”

“Yes...”

“After all, in the high school section it’s a mixed bag. Be careful in who you associate with, Reika-san.”

“It is not a problem. By the way, Otousama, would you like one more? There are still many left.”

“Really? Since you made them for me, maybe I’ll have one more.”

“Dear. Eating before bed like this will make your cholesterol rise again.”

“...I suppose.”

Oh gosh, Otousama.

You have high cholesterol?

I'd better get that healthy food program started right away.

I decided to learn from Akimi-san as soon as the exams were over.

I gave Oniisama's portion a proper cling wrap before putting them in the fridge.

Apparently microwaving them would make the insides nice and soft again, so he could have some when he came back from work!

Haaah.

In the end I never gave any proper chocolates to a boy I liked.

I did pop into the library after school, but Naru-kun wasn't there.

Even if I didn't have the guts to give them over properly, I thought it would be nice to sneak some into his bag while he wasn't looking.

Thinking about it later, though, it would have been scary to find food you didn't know about in there...

Thank goodness I didn't do it...

I got sleepy while waiting for Oniisama in my room, so I decided to take a nap in my bed and ended up sleeping soundly until morning.

Geez, Oniisama. What time did you come home anyway?

Since I didn't know when I'd see Imari-sama next, I had somebody send over the fondant au chocolat, as well as some coffee from a chocolate shop.

After all, there was no way the Chief of the Casanova village wouldn't have plans on Valentine's day, right?

I was sure he had a lot of chocolates already, but I hoped he'd try mine.

Well, it was Imari-sama though, so I was sure he'd have a bite at least.

It would be days later when Imari-sama sent me a sachet and herb tea set from the oldest pharmacy in the world in Florence.

Imari-sama, don't tell me that you send something to everyone that gives you a chocolate!?

As expected of Imari-sama...

The day after Valentine's, Kaburagi was looking lifeless...

Was this the phenomenon that Enjou was talking about?

Chapter 196

The day after Valentine's, the thing with Yukino's chocolate had, as expected, been completely misunderstood.

"Reika-sama's real interest was in Enjou-sama!"

"I was so sure it was Kaburagi-sama!"

"But Enjou-sama is broadminded like she is, so don't they go well together?"

"And I've seen them talking to each other a lot recently."

Even my own group was using me as a topic for gossip.

You're wrong!

Ayame-chan, the Enjou fan in our group, suddenly took my hand.

"I've admired Enjou-sama for a long time, but since it's you I'll cheer you on, Reika-sama!"

I mean this: you really don't need to.

"I have mentioned this before but those chocolates were for his younger brother. Not for Enjou-sama himself."

"Geez, you're so shy, Reika-sama."

The girls all smirked at me teasingly.

Hey, my stomach is really starting to hurt so please stop that.

"I am not being shy. The chocolate was for his esteemed brother, Yukino-kun. I am making at least that much clear!"

These baseless rumours needed to be crushed.

There was only about a year left until graduation.

If because of these Enjou rumours I somehow became even *more* unpopular it would be a nightmare.

Like, what if – and I really just mean what if – but what if there was a boy who secretly had a crush on me?

If that boy heard that I liked Enjou then wouldn't he give up on me?

That would be a huge problem!

“...Well, if you're that serious about it, then we'll just take your word for it, Reika-sama.”

They seemed to sense my discomfort because they let it drop.

“Will you help me clear up the rumours?”

“We will. If anybody asks, we'll say that you said it was just for his younger brother.”

“Please, please do, okay?”

Everyone acquiesced to my desperate plea.

Thank goodness.

I'm relying on you guys!

It wouldn't be funny if the boy who secretly had a crush on me heard weird rumours and gave up just as he was thinking of confessing.

Don't give up!

Speaking of confessions though...

It was the dream, wasn't it?

Being asked to meet after school, and then pretending not to know they wanted to confess...

‘I have something I’d like to talk about, so could you stay back?’

‘Hmm? What about?’

And then in the empty classroom, illuminated by the evening sun...

‘The truth is, I’ve always liked you.’

‘Eh...?!’

Waah! That sounds so nice!

I wanted to experience it too.

“Speaking of which, Kaburagi-sama doesn’t seem too lively today.”

“Apparently he was sighing by himself in class. I wonder what happened.”

“I’m worried...”

So you were looking forward to a chocolate from Wakaba-chan, and then got depressed when you didn’t get some?

Spring is ever distant, isn’t it, Kaburagi.

In the manga the two of them were already attracted like crazy by now, but reality was harsh.

It must have been irritating though, having the most salient kid in your class moping and sighing.

“But the feeling of melancholy he gives off is dreamy too.”

“His expression really plucks at the heartstrings.”

Eh? Really?

So as long as you were hot, gloominess would transform into melancholy in people’s heads?

The world was so unfair.

The rumours about my Valentine's chocolates gradually died down thanks to my complete denials and Enjou's own answers to people who asked.

A few days later, Yukino-kun himself came to the Pivoine's salon.

"Reika-oneesan! Thank you for the Valentine's chocolates!"

This was just more evidence.

Yukino-kun is really such an angel!

I was worried about him though.

Maybe the air was too dry, because he coughed from time to time.

"Are you all right, Yukino-kun?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Is your cold better, Reika-oneesan?"

"Yes. I am very well."

I didn't have the most robust body, but I never got really sick either.

"I hear you were admitted to the hospital a little while ago. Try not to overdo it, all right?"

"Yes."

He smiled happily as he blew on the hot tea in his hands.

The other members of the Pivoine were all enraptured by him too.

They gathered around our sofa and asked him this or that.

The former President Youko-sama was there as well.

Even after retiring, Youko-sama was still the radiant centre of the Pivoine.

Kaburagi didn't do much as President, so Youko-sama still held a lot of influence.

What was troublesome was that our salon was host to both members from high school *and* middle school.

Because of that, the high school first years were already very familiar with her.

Not that I don't think Kaburagi could bring them under his own influence if he could just be bothered to use his charisma.

The guy himself was useless due to lovesickness though.

You know, Kaburagi, Wakaba-chan still irritates Youko-sama.

If you became the president to protect her, shouldn't you get your act together!

"Reika-oneesan, is something wrong?"

"Eh?"

"Your expression looked a little scary for a moment."

"Oh goodness, I apologise. I was distracted for a moment..."

I guess without realising I had been glaring at Kaburagi.

I mean, he was just sitting there carefree, reading some book.

I quickly put on a smile for Yukino-kun.

Wow.

It must be nice, relaxing over there, oblivious to everyone else's worries.

What *was* he reading, anyhow?

Don't tell me it was another poem anthology!?

God, what if it was Heine again?

I sealed the last one away because it had the stench of being dumped.

I wonder if having it nearby was the cause of my love troubles.

Maybe there was a better way of disposing of it.

Oh, maybe I could give it to Tsuruhana-san.

She'd always been fond of Kaburagi, after all.

I bet she'd be overjoyed.

But despite being his fan, apparently she gave chocolates to a whole slew of boys.

Some upperclassmen confessed to her too.

Why!

She had such a bad personality, so why was she so popular!?

Did nobody care about your personality as long as you were a beauty!?

So boys were all like that after all!

And why not me...!?

"Reika-oneesan?"

Oh gosh. Did I make a scary face again?

Ah well, whatever.

While everyone was caught up in romance, I was going to study my butt off and make a come-back on the ranking board.

Just watch me!

Tonight I was studying past midnight.

For supper, I'd have red udon for good luck.

Anyhow, after Yukino left with Enjou, I stayed back at the salon for a bit before heading to the carpark.

Katsuragi was glaring at me there.

“Did you really give chocolates to Enjou-san!?”

You don’t have to shout. I can hear you just fine.

And wow, is your information network slow.

“They were for his brother, Yukino.”

Since it was cold I just walked right past him.

“Enjou-san already has Yuiko-san! You got that? Don’t get in the way!”

Aah, shut up already.

That was something to think about, though.

There was a chance that Yuiko-san might have heard about the chocolates too...

What a pain.

Chapter 197

Kaburagi discovered graffiti on Wakaba-chan's desk.

He normally came to school a bit later.

That day he just happened to come early, so he headed to Enjou's classroom, spotted Wakaba-chan cleaning her desk, and then noticed what she was cleaning off.

'Ugly!'

'Disappear!'

When he saw the insults he flew into a rage.

"Who was it!? Who did this!?"

People could hear his voice from down the hallway.

"Speak up! Who wrote this!?"

My friends and I were amongst them, so we left our classroom to investigate.

"What might be going on?"

"Well..."

And that was how I found out what had happened.

Kaburagi glared this way and that, pinning people under his gaze.

"Answer me. Who did this?"

The Emperor of Suiran was truly angry now.

Scary.

Besides my own group, plenty of other people who had come out of curiosity were standing frozen.

Wakaba-chan timidly came up to him, still holding her cleaning rag.

“Kaburagi-sama, um, please calm down...” she tried to stop him, but...

“How am I supposed to calm down!?” he yelled at her instead. “It’s bullshit! Aren’t you angry at all about this!?”

“Ah, I mean...”

“...Don’t tell me this wasn’t the first time?”

Putting the graffiti aside, most of the bullying was done in a way that the boys wouldn’t notice.

Thanks to that, I suppose, Kaburagi hadn’t had much of an idea of what she had to go through.

Well, he still didn’t have one, actually.

The majority of it was insulting her when Kaburagi and Enjou weren’t around, or talking behind her back right in front of her.

And it wasn’t all girls either.

There were the guys jealous of her grades.

“Ummm...”

Her eyes swam and she looked for an excuse, and Kaburagi’s expression grew even harsher.

“Who was it!?”

It wasn’t often that you saw this much emotion from him.

Kaburagi then proceeded to question each and every person there.

Most of them said they didn't know, but sometimes one would let it slip they didn't know about *today's* incident, which caused them to be questioned further.

In the end, a few people admitted that they had seen Tsuruhana-san's group or some other girls writing on Wakaba-chan's desk a few times, causing the girls in question to pale.

"So it was you..."

You could almost *see* the black rage he was seething with.

"I-It wasn't us! And look, we only just got to school!"

"It wasn't us *either*!"

Despite being afraid of him, they still managed to find excuses.

"You've done it before."

"We..."

"We don't..."

"So in other words you might have asked someone else to do it today."

"We didn't! To begin with, *everyone* in the school hates Takamichi-san so it's ridiculous that you're pinning it all on us!"

"What did you say!?"

That was when Enjou arrived.

He looked a little surprised to see his best friend causing a fuss in his classroom.

"Morning, Masaya. What's wrong?" he asked.

"What's *wrong*!?" Kaburagi bellowed, and pointed at the desk. "Takamichi has been putting up with all this senseless harassment!"

The desk still had some marker ink on it.

It was the first time somebody had used something other than pencil, so it stood out a lot more.

“Ah... I see,” Enjou nodded.

Being that he shared a class with her, he was probably more aware of her plight than Kaburagi.

“Anyway, I’m going to find out who did this.”

“Isn’t that the Student Council President’s job, Masaya?”

Kaburagi frowned at the mention.

“They aren’t even around when they need to be. What can *they* do?”

“Ummm... The President, Mizusaki-kun, is having a meeting with the teachers about the graduation ceremony next month, so...” Wakaba-chan explained.

She was in the Student Council too, after all.

Kaburagi snorted.

“Takamichi, do you have any idea who did this?”

“Eh? Ah, who knows...”

Probably so many that she didn’t know where to start.

Kaburagi began looking for the culprit again.

Enjou just observed from the side.

Wakaba-chan herself was just ignored, and looked to be at a loss.

It wouldn’t be good to let this drag on.

Still, I loathed getting involved.

“Class is about to start, so shall we just clean up her desk for now?” I said quietly while

giving her a glance.

“You’re right,” she agreed, after coming back to herself in a start.

She began cleaning the desk with her rag again.

Some girls from the Student Council brought their own rags to help.

The ink was apparently water-based, so before long it was cleaned away.

Thank goodness it hadn’t been oil-based.

Since people had been arriving at school, the crowd outside the classroom was even bigger now.

“What’s going on?” called a sharp voice.

The crowd parted and revealed Youko-sama and her followers.

Uergh!

The last person I wanted here had appeared.

Youko-sama looked over the classroom.

“I arrive at school in the morning to this huge uproar. Somebody explain this to me.”

The appearance of the former president of the Pivoine had the noisy classroom silent.

One student whispered something in her ear, causing her to let out a huge sigh.

She gave Wakaba-chan a cold glance.

“You again, Takamichi-san?”

“I’m sorry...” she said in a small voice.

“How many times are you going to cause chaos before you’re satisfied?”

“Is that not a little inappropriate?” Kaburagi said protectively. “She is the victim.”

“She may indeed be the victim. But is this not the consequence of her regular behaviour? I have heard much about her history of being problematic.”

To Youko-sama, it was a chance to air her own dissatisfaction.

“Could I ask what problematic behaviour you refer to?”

“You could call it behaving in a manner unbecoming of a student at Suiran.”

“Unbecoming...?”

“Indeed. Takamichi-san? Could it be that in order to have these people protect you, you drew on that desk yourself?”

Ehh!?

She was going *that* far!?

Kaburagi’s expression changed.

“Okishima-senpai. Isn’t that being a little too cruel? Please apologise to Takamichi-san.”

He was glaring now.

Uwawawawah! She’s your senpai, you know!

Youko-sama on the other hand seemed offended that he would ask for that.

“That’s quite impossible. The heart of the matter is that Takamichi-san has done unbelievable things, time and time again.”

“Okishima-senpai! If you go any further...” his fists shook as he warned her.

This was looking really bad...

Just when things were about to explode, Enjou stepped between them.

“Okishima-senpai, Masaya has always despised cowardly acts like this, so the blood must have gone to his head. Could you give me some face and back down just this

once?” Enjou smiled disarmingly.

Youko-sama’s expression softened after seeing this.

“...Well if *you’re* asking, Enjou-sama, then I suppose I must.”

“Thank you very much. Since class is starting soon, please allow me to escort you there.”

And with a smile, Enjou escorted her out of the room.

...S-Scaryyyy!

You did well, Enjou!

I think I speak for everyone when I say that!

The period bell rang, so the peanut gallery all began leaving for their classes.

Kaburagi on the other hand held Wakaba-chan’s shoulders tightly.

“If anything happens, you tell me. I’ll protect you.”

“Eh...!?”

Her face turned red.

Ehh!?

Did her heart *really* just throb to *Kaburagi!?*

And Wakaba-chan, your mouth is hanging open!

“Youko-sama was right,” muttered a girl, “Wasn’t all this just a farce to get the Emperor’s attention?”

“Sounds like something she’d do...” muttered another.

From that day onwards, Kaburagi was often spotted at Wakaba-chan’s side.

Chapter 198

Ever since that day, Kaburagi seemed to think that he couldn't protect Wakaba-chan without gaining proper control over the Pivoine.

He seemed a little more aware of his position than before.

Only a little more though.

Still, Enjou helped him out where necessary, so the era of President Kaburagi was finally here.

Probably.

The day of graduation for Youko-sama and the third years had come.

I wasn't so optimistic to think that things would calm down because of that.

The elitists in the Pivoine were still strongly influenced by her.

Even if Kaburagi had a lot of support because of his charisma, I doubted it was so easy to deal with the antipathy towards Wakaba-chan.

Actually, the more people liked Kaburagi, the more they would disapprove of a commoner External Student as his girlfriend.

If you can't be with the person you adore, then you wanted the person they chose to at least be somebody so wonderful that you could never compare.

It was a self-involved line of thought, but plenty of people thought that way.

I mean, in my opinion it wasn't anyone else's business who somebody had feelings for, but it wasn't like I couldn't understand at least a little.

If Oniisama introduced some strange lady as his girlfriend I really doubted I could be so magnanimous as to accept her.

In fact I'd definitely get in her way.

Also I'd probably be disappointed about how little taste Oniisama had.

Ah, no, no, I still believe that Oniisama will bring home somebody wonderful, okay?

While I was thinking about that, the ceremony had continued.

Kaburagi walked to the podium.

He was giving the farewell address this year.

Since he was the President of the Pivoine as well, he was perfect for it.

He looked really dignified up there, voice projected through the auditorium.

Graduates, younger students, and even some of the parents were sighing in admiration.

From the outside he was outstanding after all.

A shame about the inside.

Given that the majority of Suiran students stayed here most of their schooling life, there wasn't much in the way of crying at either the primary or middle school graduation ceremonies.

On the other hand, that meant that the high school graduation signified a separation with some of the same people you'd grown up with, so here and there you could hear sniffing.

Now that the ceremony had finished, people were leaving the auditorium.

"Youko-sama, congratulations on graduating."

Other members of the Pivoine were also handing flowers to the upperclassmen in it.

"Thank you. Everyone, please take care of the Pivoine after we're gone."

We nodded obediently.

Alumni sometimes still showed up at parties, but this was still the end in a lot of ways.

“Reika-sama, I hope that you’ll support Kaburagi-sama as well. Please lead the girls of Suiran.”

“I will.”

Although in my opinion supporting Kaburagi was Enjou’s job.

Ah well, just nod along, Reika.

Kaburagi was wearing a rare smile as he and Enjou congratulated our senpai on graduating, much to their delight.

No matter how deplorable he might have been, Kaburagi was still the son of a distinguished family.

He knew how to do at least this much.

As for Youko-sama, the members of the Pivoine who particularly adored her had gathered around as she instructed them on something or other, before leaving the school.

Right on the heels of the graduation ceremony were more tests.

I know it might not have looked like it, but I really did my best.

Every day I secretly exhausted myself studying.

I had asked Wakaba-chan when she studied, and she told me usually in the morning and evening on the train.

Desperately, I even went out of my way during the weekend to study with flashcards on the train.

Ririna who had great grades without trying had also mentioned studying on the car to school.

Did the movement from transport help you remember things or something?

All it did was make my drowsy.

Anyway, the point was that I studied really hard, okay?

All for the sake of regaining my glory on the ranking boards.

To be honest I was actually pretty depressed about my marks dropping back in Term 2.

I had been really hoping to get good marks near Christmas.

Huh? Why?

Because I could use them to get Christmas presents.

Not that my family didn't buy me presents every year.

But that wasn't what I wanted.

I wanted Oniisama to say, "Reika, here's a present for trying so hard on your tests."

I love being praised.

I really got a wake-up call when I saw the rankings without my name.

'Why are you messing around during the most important tests of the year?' I thought.

That's why I studied like mad this time.

White Day was coming up soon, after all!

And the results of all that effort?

Rank 29.

I just barely made it...

The wall of rank 25 was too crazy for me.

I mean, I suppose 29 counted as pretty decent at Suiran, but I'd have a hard time

measuring up at a national school.

Over the next year, students everywhere else were really going to kick into gear to study for their university entrance exams.

I still wasn't sure if I wanted to go to a national university or Suiran's.

Although considering how little I liked pain and effort, Suiran was looking pretty attractive.

Plus, Kaburagi wasn't my enemy at the moment, and neither Otousama nor Oniisama seemed to be doing too badly at work.

Maybe I could change up my goals.

I had my end-of-year report card sandwiched in my textbook as I waited for Oniisama to come home.

When he did, he had company in the form of Imari-sama.

Yaay, Imari-samaa!

Ah, but then I couldn't boast about my marks in front of him.

I was planning on 'accidentally' letting it slip from my textbook.

Ah well, Plan Textbook could wait until tomorrow then.

"Good evening, Reika-chan. Thanks for the Valentine's chocolate. It was great!"

"Gokigen'yoh, Imari-sama. Thank you instead for the wonderful return gift."

"No, no, it was my pleasure. You're great at making desserts, aren't you. When I think about how Takateru gets to eat your delicious, love-filled chocolates every year I start to get pretty jealous."

"My~"

Guhuhu, thank you, Wakaba-chan, Kanta-kun.

I know that was half flattery, but compliments are so nice to hear.

Although Oniisama looked like he had eaten something bitter.

“Anyway, the reason I’m here today is actually because there was something I wanted to give you,” he said, before presenting me with a bag. “Here, it’s a little early, but Happy White Day.”

“Goodness. You have already given me something wonderful for the Valentine’s chocolate! Is this all right?”

“Of course it is.”

Oh! Honey candies from that famous honey store.

“These are acacia candies and eucalyptus honey candies! They look wonderful.”

“You like honey, don’t you, Reika-chan? That’s why I thought about going with these. Do you like them?”

“I love them. Thank you!”

“There’s actually one more thing.”

Imari-sama placed a square box onto my hand.

I opened it up to find a silver ball inside.

Some kind of modern art?

“What is it?”

“My, my, what indeed? Pick it up and give it a shake.”

I did as told, and the globe chimed melodiously.

“Waah!”

“They call it a spherical music box. It chimes when you shake it. Sounds great, doesn’t it?”

“It does. It sounds like a suikinkutsu.”

I shook it against my ear.

Aah, it was so lovely.

“You have exams this year, don’t you? When you’re tired, give it a listen. Okay?” he smiled as he tilted his head.

S-So dazzling!

Haaahh...

This was truly what it meant to be the village chief of the Casanova Village.

I was going to hold this when I studied!

“If that’s all, go home,” Oniisama said coldly, before shooping him out.

You should at least get your friend some tea, Oniisama.

The next day, I executed Plan Textbook, and not only did I extract a White Day present from him, he also promised to take me out to eat sometime.

Mmhuu~

But he didn’t say on White Day.

Hey, Oniisama.

Don’t tell me you’ve actually got a secret girlfriend you’re hiding from me?

Chapter 199

Class Rep and Iwamuro-kun asked me for advice on what White Day Presents to get Miharuchan and Nonose-san.

Since that was the case, I immediately recommended the honey candies that I got from Imari-sama.

They were sweet and delicious, and good for your throat on top of that.

“Wow! Maybe I should go with those,” said Class Rep.

“But I guess the two of us can’t get the same thing, huh,” Iwamuro-kun commented.

“I would also like to suggest caramel candies, in that case,” I said.

I received them from Imari-sama during the summer.

“Caramel?”

“Yes. There are many different types, all bursting with flavour.”

“Then maybe I’ll go with those...”

The French marshmallows I got from Tomoe-senpai and Kasumi-sama were good too.

It had Kaburagi’s mark of approval. I decided to tell them about those too.

“Those sound good too.”

“Then what should we give them alongside the sweets? Honda-san loved the mittens she got for Valentine’s. Actually... I bought matching gloves in a different colour but I couldn’t say it... I’ve just been using them in secret.”

Class Rep was a maiden through-and-through.

Listening to a blushing Class Rep talk about how the hand-made chocolates from

“Honda-san were the sweetest I’ve ever tasted” was somehow even more embarrassing to listen to than Shimazaki Touson’s First Love.

Anyway, a cute present, huh...

“From my experience, perhaps a spherical music box, or a necklace, or perhaps a sachet and herb tea set... I might also suggest boxed flowers since they would be easy to carry home.”

All of these were presents I had received from Imari-sama of the mighty Casanova Village.

“What are boxed flowers?” asked Class Rep.

“When you take off the lid of the box, inside are flowers all around.”

“Oh okay.”

“That does seem cute...” admired Iwamuro-kun.

He did love cute things after all.

To be honest he seemed better suited to receiving flowers than giving them.

Anyway, there was no reason to restrict the present to items.

“Perhaps another option would be to invite them to an amusement park during the summer break, and hand them a free pass...”

“That’s such a bold idea, Master!”

“At Suiran, most people hand out store-made chocolates. If the four of you are close enough to be receiving hand-made chocolates, then I think they would happily accept the invitation.”

“Kisshouin-san! Please grant me strength!”

“Master!”

The two of them chanted “Bless us. Bless us.” as they bowed to me.

I couldn't refuse these cute disciples of mine, so I gave them the little luck in romance I had and sent them off.

I hope things went well.

Haah... So dizzy.

Dizzy and nauseous and cold too...

Even breathing was hard.

It was a struggle to keep my eyes open...

"What's the matter, Reika-sama? Good heavens, you're so pale!"

"Are you okay, Reika-sama?"

It was getting so bad that I couldn't respond.

I was feeling really sick...

"Let's go to the infirmary, Reika-sama."

"That's a good idea. Can you stand?"

"Her hands are ice cold. Are you okay, Reika-sama?"

I stood from my seat but lost consciousness for a second.

Aah~

This wouldn't do.

My ears were ringing and it was hard to listen to them.

In the end they supported me on each side and I was brought half-unconscious to the nurse's office.

"Sensei, Reika-sama is feeling ill."

“My! Could it be anaemia? Have a lie down on the bed.”

With the help of the girls, I did just that.

I closed my eyes, but somehow the world kept spinning.

“Leave the rest to me, girls. You should get back before the next class starts.”

“Yes.”

“Get well soon, Reika-sama.”

I managed to squeeze out a thank you before they left.

According to the nurse I was feeling giddy because of lack of sleep.

I actually spent the last three days reading this series of full-length novels, so I wasn't getting more than 5 hours each night.

Huh. Come to think of it I didn't sleep at all last night since the story had reached its climax...

To get some oxygen into my head I went without the pillow, and put it under my ankles instead.

“Have a little rest like this. If you're not feeling any better later, then go home.”

I did as she said and closed my eyes, falling asleep in no time.

I got up feeling totally fine.

Sleep is pretty important, huh!

The nurse was sitting at her desk and writing something, so I called out to her as I got out of bed.

“Sensei, I seem to be feeling better now.”

“You're feeling all right?”

“Yes. I feel good as new.”

I was still a bit sleepy, but it was like I had never felt ill to begin with.

“You’re looking better as well. Don’t stay up too late now.”

“I will not. Thank you for looking after me.”

And sorry for being so much trouble.

I’m reflecting.

“The period is about to end, so you woke up just in time for the next class. Do you want to stay here until the bell?”

“No, but thank you. I would like to visit my locker.”

I said goodbye and left.

Since classes were still in session, the hallway was devoid of people.

The only sign of anyone else was the voices that I occasionally heard from inside the shut classrooms.

Besides that, all I could hear were my footsteps.

At any rate, I headed for my own locker.

I was going to need my books for the next class.

When I arrived on the second floor, I heard something being dropped, and then somebody speeding away.

Hm?

Strange. Weren’t classes still going on?

I wondered if some class had gotten an early mark when I came across a felt-tipped marker on the ground.

I suppose this was what I heard then.

I picked it up and looked for whoever dropped it but there was nobody in sight.

Maybe I could just drop it off with the Student Council then.

I continued onwards to my locker only to receive quite a shock.

‘Stop coming to school!’

What the heck...

The nametag said ‘Takamichi Wakaba’.

This was Wakaba-chan’s locker.

So the person I heard earlier was the culprit and they were running away from me!

Of course that was when the bell rang.

Some of the classrooms emptied out right on the dot.

And they noticed both me and the locker.

“Eh...”

Eh...?

Wai-, *aahh*!

Don’t tell me they thought *I* was the culprit!?

“No, this is not what it looks like! I only just got here too,” I babbled, but people gathered around and began gossiping anyway.

“What’s going on?”

“Takamichi-san’s locker?”

“What’s happening?” came another voice. “Ehh~? What the heck!?”

Of all people, it had to be Tsuruhana-san's class that finished first...

The girl gave a malicious smirk when she saw the locker and the pen in my hand.

"What do we have here? After all the self-righteous talk, the great Reika-sama is secretly doing the same dirty things as everybody else," she exulted.

"It was *not* me!"

"I didn't see anybody else around. What were you even doing here out of class?"

"I was just coming back from the infirmary."

"You're even holding a felt-tip marker and you're still not owning up?"

"I had simply found it on the ground here."

"How very convenient."

"It is the truth!"

"We all know that you secretly hate her too. That's why you're harassing her in secret, right?"

"No!"

But of course, it was undeniable that I was the most suspicious person here.

Everyone else had an alibi, being in class and all.

And while I was stuck here as a suspect, more and more people came to gather around.

What was I going to do...!?

The teachers were trying to sort out the mess but nobody was listening.

It was too interesting.

"Reika-sama!"

Serika-chan and the others had heard and come as well.

“What’s your problem, you lot! As if Reika-sama would ever do something like this!”

“But the proof is right here.”

“What proof!? Didn’t *you lot* do this to *frame* her!?”

“Hey! Don’t blame the uninvolved!”

“You’re the ones accusing Reika-sama!”

Then, with the worst timing possible, Kaburagi came along.

“What’s going on...?”

He had one look at Wakaba-chan’s locker before his eyes turned angry.

“This again...!?”

“The culprit is Reika-sama over there,” Tsuruhana-san declared.

“Kisshouin...?”

Kaburagi frowned and looked over at me.

Oh no!

Oh no, oh no!

“It was not!”

“But you were the only one here, Reika-sama. And you were even holding the pen.”

“No, but Kisshouin...”

Kaburagi seemed undecided.

“She might pretend to be a good person but in secret she hates Takamichi-san more than anyone, right? I bet all the past bullying has been her work too.”

“But... Kisshouin is...”

“We just didn’t know about it. She’s been looking into Takamichi-san’s day-to-day life and harassing her in a way that nobody would find out. I bet that afterwards she had girls from Takamichi-san’s class report to her, where she’d gleefully listen to Takamichi-san’s reactions.”

That’s you, damnit! Only you would come up with that!

Or so I was about to say when I was attacked again from an unexpected angle.

“Come to think of it, at cram school Kisshouin-san asked me how Takamichi-san was doing in class...” muttered some boy.

Who was that!?

I turned around and it was Tagaki-kun from cram school!

Ehhh!?

Tagaki-kun, you’re picking *now* to say that!?

I mean I asked but I didn’t mean anything bad about it!

Maybe he was just muttering to himself, but that was the worst timing ever!

My position grew ever more precipitous.

“Kisshouin, don’t tell me you really...”

Kaburagi seemed dumbfounded.

No way!

Don’t tell me he really thought I was the culprit!?

That I was bullying Wakaba-chan, and the enemy!?

Gyaaaah!

It was here!

The ruin of my family had finally come!

Our company was going to be taken over, and then we'd be out on the streets!

Aaah! I had to fix this somehow...

But how...!?

"It wasn't Reika-sama!" somebody suddenly screamed.

Eh?

"Reika-sama would never do something like that!" they said.

The crowd split apart to reveal Mochida-san, walking forwards with trembling legs.

She was the girl who was bullied by Tsuruhana-san back in middle school.

After it was over, we still said hello to each other sometimes, but that was about it.

She was a shy girl as always, so it was to my surprise that she even spoke up.

"What's your problem?" glared Tsuruhana-san.

Mochida-san flinched but shakily repeated herself.

"Reika-sama would never do something like that!" she yelled. "Reika-sama would never bully someone else! She helped me... Reika-sama was the one who helped me when I was alone!"

Her eyes were teary and her face was red.

"Tsuruhana-san and her friends used to bully me. Every day was so hard that even coming to school was a struggle!"

The girls in question looked a bit awkward under everyone's gazes.

"Nobody came to help me! I was on the verge of quitting school! But Reika-sama

offered a hand to me! She said hello to me! Every day, she encouraged me! She saved me!"

Openly crying now, Mochida-san continued to scream 'It wasn't Reika-sama! It wasn't Reika-sama!'

"M-Mochida-san?" I asked hesitantly.

Suddenly it seemed like something inside her snapped, because she started moaning 'Uuuuu~!' as her whole body convulsed and her eyes rolled back into her head!

Uwaaahhh!

It was like Mochida-san had been possessed!

I'm so sorry for saying this after you did your best to protect me but I'm sorry, it's *scaryyy*!

"Well said, Mochida-san!"

"I've rethought my opinion of you, Mochida-san!"

Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan praised her bravery as they supported her on either side.

She was breathing heavily now, and her eyes were back to normal.

Thank goodness...

She came back to herself...

Thank you so much, Mochida-san.

She was so terrified that she even went mental for a moment.

It must have been so tough for a shy girl like her.

"I don't think it was her either," declared Wakaba-chan.

I didn't even know when she arrived, but she had Enjou with her, and went to stand

next to Kaburagi.

“Takamichi...”

“Kisshouin-san isn’t the type to do these things. Absolutely not! I’m certain of it. Her only involvement was picking up that marker.”

W-Wakaba-chan!

You believe me!?

Even with all this proof against me?

“Haah? And you can just decide that? Don’t tell me you’re trying to suck up to her? Or was it like Youko-sama said, and all a farce that you set up yourself?”

“Oi, Tsuruhana!”

“It’s my objective opinion. First of all, Kisshouin-san isn’t the type to use these kinds of underhanded means. Next, if Kisshouin-san did have a problem with me, she’s powerful enough that just muttering ‘She’s an eyesore’ would be enough to make my life hell.”

Y-, Yeah. Am I supposed to feel happy or sad about this...

“It *is* true that Kisshouin is the type that crushes you head-on.”

“Yeah. And that woman goes for the jugular from the start.”

“She only needs to strike once. A killer’s instinct...”

What the-, who was saying strange things *this* time!?

You again, Soccer Club President!?

Stop looking away! At least have the guts to look me in the eye!

And hey! Wasn’t my image just getting worse and worse, here?

And you, please tell me you actually just meant ‘killer instinct’.

“The point is that I’m certain that it wasn’t Kisshouin-san,” declared Wakaba-chan.

Since the victim herself said so, that brought the incident to a close.

Plus, after the teachers heard about what happened, they confirmed that I had been in the infirmary until just before the bell.

Not only that, but since I was part of the Pivoine the teachers would have gone easy on me anyway.

It didn’t take long for them to judge me as innocent.

Not that people didn’t still suspect me...

“You were so unlucky, Reika-sama!”

“Seriously. As if Reika-sama would ever do something like that!”

Thank you for cheering me up, guys.

“Still. My opinion of Takamichi-san might have changed, just a little.”

“Same...”

Because she covered me, my group’s attitude towards Wakaba-chan was a little different now.

Speaking of which, I wanted to have a talk with her, and ask her why she believed me while I was at it.

I sent her a message asking her to meet me after school today.

Chapter 200

In order to avoid being spotted by anyone from Suiran, we agreed to meet up one station down from her house, in a lonely little café that none of them would ever visit.

Just being extra careful, right?

A cow bell rang as I opened the door, and I stepped into a café with a retro aesthetic.

Wakaba-chan was reading a textbook at a seat near the back.

I see.

So the smart kids made use of this time to study too!

“Sorry, did I keep you waiting?”

“Nope, not at all. I actually thought you’d be a little longer, really,” she smiled, closing her book.

On a day like this I’d normally have gone to the salon, and then to the clubroom, but I told them all that I was feeling bad.

On the way out Kaburagi seemed like he really wanted to say something, but that was scary so I power walked to the car park.

Thank goodness he hadn’t asked me to stop...

Since this place didn’t serve hot chocolate, I went with milk tea instead.

Wakaba-chan was drinking a hot coffee.

She’s so mature.

“I was surprised *you* would be here so early, Takamichi-san. Was there no Student Council work today?”

“There was, but I said I had some family matters to take care of so they excused me.”

“I see...”

Fellow Stalking Horse had also asked me what happened in his capacity as the StuCo President.

All I could tell him was that I heard somebody while on the way back from the nurse’s office. I picked up the marker and discovered the graffiti.

I wonder if he believed me.

The other members of his Student Council seemed to be suspicious of me.

“At any rate, regarding today’s incident...”

“Yeah. It must have been rough, Kisshouin-san. Was everything okay after that? You really had it tough.”

The first words that came out of her mouth were sympathies.

“Ah... So you really believe me when I say it was not I, then...”

“Of course I do!” she nodded.

Her expression told me that it wasn’t even in question.

Not even a doubt in her mind.

“Why are you so certain of that? I am quite sure that I was the most suspicious one there. I would have thought a little doubt to be natural...”

“Ehh? It’s because I’ve always considered you my closest ally, I guess.”

“!?”

What the hell!?

Uuu, I’m so happy, Wakaba-chan!

That's what you've thought of me!?

But...

"On what basis? What if Tsuruhana-san was correct, and I actually despise you in secret?" I said a little contrarily.

There were people like that in the world.

I knew what kind of person Wakaba-chan was, but she didn't know me nearly as well. Certainly not well enough to be certain that I meant well, right?

"No way," she laughed. "In secret you've been helping me out too, right?"

I wasn't sure why she could smile so confidently about that.

I was a little confused about it.

"I recall doing nothing of the sort."

"Eh, really?"

"Yes."

She folded her arms and hummed.

"Well if she's that keen on keeping it a secret, maybe I shouldn't say anything...? Ahh, but is she *really* keeping it a secret...? I mean, that wasn't keeping it a secret at all, right...?" she muttered.

"Takamichi-san?"

"Ahh~ Umm... Kisshouin-san, a while back you uh, wrote me a letter filled with what to look out for in Suiran, didn't you?"

"Eh!?"

How come!?

Why did she know it was me!?

“Ah... Going by the look on your face, you really *were* trying to hide it then?”

Wakaba-chan smiled a little helplessly at me.

“Eh? Eh!? How!?”

And I was so careful to keep it anonymous too.

So how did she realise it was me!?

“How long have you known!?”

“Well, from the start.”

“From the start!?”

“Yeah.”

Eeehhh!?

“If you looked at the inside of the envelope under a light there was a little Kisshouin crest. So yeah, when I first opened it I realised it was from you.”

Ehhh!?

What the hell!? I didn’t know about that at all!

It’s true that I used our family’s letter set since the one I had was a little plain, but I thought I was in the clear since I avoided the one with our crest on the back!

But despite all that there was a watermark on the inside!?

I had no idea!

“You didn’t sign the letter, but since the envelope had your family’s crest on it I figured that you were using that instead.

“But after a while, from your attitude, I started thinking that perhaps you had been trying to keep it a secret...

“I thought about thanking you so many times, but if you were trying to hide it then I thought maybe it would be better to avoid mentioning it.

“Which is why I hadn’t mentioned it until now. I mean, you even referred to yourself in third person.”

UGYYAAAAAAHHH!

THIS IS SO EMBARRASSINGG!!

‘Kisshouin-san’ I called myself!

I even thought I was so clever about it!

Even though she knew from *the start!*

This is hell! Somebody kill me!

‘Kisshouin-san’s group wields the most influence amongst the 1st Year girls of Suiran, so take care around them’?

Hahaha, who actually says that about themselves?

Seriously, ‘Kisshouin-san’!?

Aren’t you the one who wrote it!?

I thumped my head onto the table and began grating my head against it.

“Ah geez, Kisshouin-san, are you okay?”

I’m not okay...

I’m about to die of shame.

“Sometimes I sent you little signs though. Like when I made the seven-herb congee for you. Your letter warned me to be careful while picking wild herbs after all.”

So that really *was* pre-meditated!

“Plus, around the time I got your letter, the gardener told me to be careful as well. You told him to warn me too, right?”

“..”

I guess she knew it all, then.

At this point the only thing I could do was sulk.

“...I see. Well thank you *very* much for all your consideration... I was the one who wrote it, oh yes.”

“Mmn...”

Wakaba-chan gave another helpless smile as I sulked.

“Well anyway, that’s why I think you’re on my side.”

“Yes...”

“And I finally get to say it now; thank you for being sincere, and always coming to help me, Kisshouin-san.”

Uu...

“You are welcome...”

I was so ashamed that I couldn’t even look at her in the face—

After that I listened to her talk about the Student Council.

Apparently Fellow Stalking Horse didn’t think I did it either.

“It doesn’t fit her M.O.” he apparently said.

“Just the time you shut up those sports clubs was enough to remember you did things completely differently. Man, that fan was something else!” laughed Wakaba-chan.

Is that so?

When I got home later that day, I checked what I thought were unmarked envelopes.

Just like Wakaba-chan said, it seemed plain on the inside until you shone a light on it, and our family's crest appeared.

Geh, it was true.

But I'm impressed that you even found this, Wakaba-chan...

I vowed never just to slack off and use my family's stationery to send anonymous letters ever again.

Wakaba-chan might have believed me, but the problem was Kaburagi.

If he ever decided that I was Wakaba-chan's enemy, my future was over.

I needed to find a way to make him understand, and secure the safety of my family.

But how.

If I revealed the nature of my relationship with Wakaba-chan then it would certainly solve the current issue.

But if the whole school realised it as well, it would make life a lot harder for me.

Well, whatever the case, I'd have to see how Kaburagi behaved tomorrow...

If he didn't say a word to me, then I'd just leave it be.

Yeah, that sounded like a good idea.

But despite that, no sooner had school ended did Kaburagi call out to me.

Hiiiiiee~!

We weren't in the salon right now.

Instead, he had brought me to a small conference room.

I guess he asked for permission so that he'd have a place where we wouldn't be heard.

Scaryy.

What was I going to do if he sentenced me to death?

“Umm, so what was it you wished to speak to me about...?” I asked nervously.

“Yeah. About yesterday’s locker incident.”

I knew it!

“It was not me!”

“I know.”

“Heh?”

So he hadn’t called me here because I was a suspect?

“I’ll admit that I was a little suspicious. But afterwards Iwamuro told me that you were absolutely not the kind of person to do that.”

“Iwamuro-kun did?”

He and Kaburagi knew each other!?

Apparently Iwamuro had once been his horse.

“Your class rep came and told me the same thing. You’re pretty popular, Kisshouin.”

Maiden’s Society—! You came through for me!

“Sorry for even doubting you.”

“No... But I see now. In that case, what was it you wished to speak about?”

“It’s a bit hard to say, but...”

Kaburagi hesitated for a moment.

“The truth is, I actually have a girl I like...”

“I see.”

I already know that. And?

“I’d like your help with that.”

“Ehh!?”

Why *me*!?

“Why *me*!?”

“Both Iwamuro and Class Rep said that your hair was a god of love.”

“Ehh!?”

What the hell do you mean my hair!?

“Apparently by touching it you’ll be granted luck in romance. They say it’s super effective.”

“Ehh!?”

Class Rep—!

“Do you *truly* believe such a story?”

“Ah, I mean, not really but... honestly I just wanted a girl to talk to about these things. And you were the best suited for that.”

“Ehh~”

Choose somebody else, please.

“Please, Kisshouin. I won’t ask anything unreasonable.”

“Ehh~”

No way.

In the past you used me as a gopher, didn't you.

And I don't want to get involved in your romance either.

But I doubted Kaburagi would back down.

I probably couldn't even leave until I accepted.

Ugh.

I didn't even have a choice, did I!?

Hm, but if I had to do it either way, then...

I suddenly had a wonderful idea.

"...I understand. But I have a few conditions."

"Shoot."

"You will not at any point in the future attempt to uncover evidence of crimes committed by my family, nor will you attempt to destroy us. Please swear on this."

"Is your family involved in crime?"

"Absolutely not! It was simply an example! Yes, an example!"

Uh oh, I might have made him suspicious for no reason.

His eyes were certainly looking suspicious.

"Any how! As long as you refuse to swear this I will not aid you in the slightest!"

"Haaah. Alright, alright. I just have to promise, right?"

"A verbal agreement is not binding."

I took out a sheet of writing paper from my bag.

"Please print the following: 'I, Kaburagi Masaya, swear not to engage in behaviours

that will bring about the ruin of the Kisshouin family’.”

“Are you guys really doing something that shady?”

“The heavens as my witness, we are doing no such thing! Now, come! Please hurry up and write it. And sign it as well, please.”

“What a pain...”

Although he complained to himself, he did as he was told and thrust the completed declaration at me.

“See? Done.”

“Not yet.”

I retrieved a box cutter from my pencilcase.

“Please use your blood to sign with your thumb print.”

“*Haah!?* Blood!? What the fuck are you saying!? Scaryy! What the fuck!? Is this a pact to murder the King or some shit!?”

“A signature is simply not enough. Please show me your resolve. Now come. The blood seal please. Come. Come.”

“No fucking way! That’s fucking *heavy*! Your folks are *definitely* up to some fucked up shit, aren’t they!? Just what kind of crazy stuff are you involved in!? No fucking way am I giving you a blood seal!”

He even tucked his thumbs into his fists.

Are you a child?

“Phew, I suppose I have no choice. In that case, as a compromise just using ink will do.”

Since I didn’t have the traditional red ink on hand, I provided him a red marker instead.

“A thumb print...? Well, if that’s all...”

Kaburagi coloured in his thumb and gave me what I wanted.

Of course none of this would hold up in a court of law, but at least Kaburagi would think twice before breaking this promise.

“Thank you very much. Well then, I promise you my cooperation, Kaburagi-sama.”

“Alright! Well then, let’s... Hang on, I’m going to go wash this ink off first.”

Kaburagi left for the bathroom.

I carefully placed his oath into my bag.

A while later he burst into the room screaming,

“Oi! This ink is freaking oil-based, damnit! It won’t come off at all!”

Geez. What an excitable guy...

Chapter 201

“Aahh, it’s finally gone...”

After finally scrubbing his thumb clean, Kaburagi returned to the small conference room.

“I scrubbed so hard that my skin’s all dry. Kisshouin, do you have any hand cream?”

What a high maintenance young master~

Honestly.

I took my hand cream out of my bag and handed it over.

He rubbed a bunch of it into his hands and looked pretty satisfied.

Curious, he turned it over to look at the brand.

I suppose he liked it.

They don’t sell that in Japan yet, so you can’t have it.

Give it back.

“Anyway, I’d like to talk about what we’re gunna do next.”

Next?

Oh right, I was supposed to help him with Wakaba-chan.

I was happy to just go along with it, all things considered.

For one thing he didn’t believe that I was the bully.

For another he had vowed not to attack my family.

“I see~”

Ah, what the hell.

I put on some hand cream too.

When you moisturised, you had to get right down to the fingernails.

Hm, it was feeling a bit dry, actually.

I made a note to use some nail oil when I got home.

“Oi, sound a bit less uncaring. Come on, I need your help. Your hair is the god of love, isn’t it? You’re supposed to have made a lot of loves bear fruit.”

“I have no recollection of my hair becoming such a thing, but...”

And also, neither Class Rep nor Iwamuro-kun’s crushes had borne *any* fruit yet.

At least in my opinion.

Speaking of which, I wonder how Sakura-chan and Akizawa-kun’s Valentine’s went.

I would ask her later.

“Oi, Kisshouin. Are you listening?”

“I most certainly am.”

Kaburagi looked at me incredibly suspiciously.

Did I seem that unconcerned?

Oh, was he angry?

Uh oh...

I quickly changed gears.

“You wanted to discuss our future plans, yes? Please continue.”

After a few more looks of distrust, Kaburagi sighed in defeat and continued.

“Kisshouin. Do you, uh, know which girl I like...?” he asked hesitantly.

“Takamichi-san, no?” I replied as a matter of course.

I was treated to a look of shock.

“So Kisshouin had noticed...” he muttered.

Hm...?

Kisshouin?

“You know... It is probably not just me. In fact, the odds are that the entire student body knows.”

“Eh...!?”

I don’t know what he was so surprised about.

I mean, with the way he was behaving *anybody* would notice.

Don’t tell me he thought he was hiding it!?

“Kaburagi-sama who only ever says the bare minimum to any girl is suddenly talking with fervour to Takamichi-san. How could anybody miss it?”

“You’re right...” he exclaimed with his hand raised to his mouth.

“Please do not tell me that *that* was your idea of hiding it?”

“No, I mean, I wasn’t really trying to hide it but being told that flat-out was...”

I guess he was embarrassed.

And considering Wakaba-chan’s position, you *should* have been trying to hide it.

“You know, the major reason Takamichi-san is being harrassed is because other girls are jealous of the attention you give her.”

His expression turned severe.

“So it was my fault...”

“Well, it was not the *only* reason.”

For one thing, she was a commoner.

For another thing, despite having her own charm, she looked a little dopey, and was a far cry from the image of a capable woman.

And this was the girl who beat out Suiran’s pride and symbol in the exam rankings.

Considering the stock they put Suiran’s image, there were plenty of people who would find Wakaba-chan unacceptable.

“Do you have any idea who the culprit was yesterday?”

“I truly cannot say...”

I had no idea, but I would look into it.

“Do you know how the staff investigation is going?” I asked.

“They won’t bother looking. They’re pushing it under the rug to avoid a fuss,” he spat.

Well, I could understand that.

If the culprit happened to be a big wig they’d really be stuck between a rock and a hard place.

A member of the Pivoine for example.

In the past there was a Pivoine member who bullied somebody into dropping out so it wasn’t impossible.

But denouncing a member of the Pivoine would result in plenty of alumni lashing back.

Since the victim was just a powerless External Student they probably figured it would be better this way...

“I’m still looking for them myself, but I’ve got nothing so far.”

“I see.”

Plus, there was no guarantee that the person from yesterday was also responsible for the graffiti on her desk.

Actually, there were still people who suspected me of being the one behind yesterday.

I needed to do something about that.

First of all I needed to spread rumours about Tsuruhana-san and her friends trying to frame me for their own harassment.

Thanks to what Mochida-san said I’m pretty sure people would believe it.

They had history of bullying, after all.

Reika-sama was just a poor girl being blamed for no reason.

Yeah, that sounds good.

Besides that, all that was left was finding the culprit.

“How do you think I can help Takamichi?”

“Considering her situation she would probably be best served with you leaving her alone.”

“Oi!”

Leaving your love for the sake of your love...

Yeah, from his expression he’s not buying that, huh.

“Are you telling me to give in to these cowards!?”

“That is not what...”

“Those tactics will never work against me. I’ll protect her. Just watch! I’ll never give

up!”

“I see...”

I might have flipped some weird switch in him.

What a bother.

“Hm?”

Kaburagi’s show of passion was interrupted when he suddenly checked his phone.

“Oh, Shuusuke’s asking where I am. Apparently people are talking about how we’re not in the salon today.”

Good timing.

I can finally get the hell out of here.

“Well then, we can continue this next time. I will be heading home now, but I suppose you will be returning the salon, no? I will continue my own investigations with the girls, so rest assured.”

“Yeah? Well that’s one thing, but we still haven’t discussed my love life at all yet. Ah well, it’s getting late I guess. Alright, we’ll continue another day.”

“Quite. Well then, please excuse me.”

I quickly made for the exit before he came up with anything else.

Unfortunately, before I made it, he stopped me again.

“Oh yeah, pass me your email address, Kisshouin.”

Geh!

“I, I do not have a...”

“I know you’ve got a phone, Kisshouin. That play won’t work. Hand it over.”

Geuhhh!

I bitterly handed it over.

I had wanted to avoid this...

I wonder if I could ignore his messages by claiming my phone was out of batteries.

Anyhow, just as I left the room he sent me a message to check that it worked.

I ignored it, only to receive another message every five minutes.

I need to change my email!

Chapter 202

After ten of those messages, I finally replied.

Strange.

Even though his test messages were all blank, somehow I could feel the anger.

I think I even hallucinated the word.

Scary.

I chickened out and told him I didn't notice because I was walking.

He complained, so I replied that patience was a virtue when it came to romance.

I was simply testing him.

I wonder what he'd say if I actually told him that.

It's going to be a huge problem if you only ever think about yourself, stupid Kaburagi!

Bleh.

Going back to the original topic, getting messaged all the time like this was going to be a pain.

If it got to be too much, would it be better to drop my phone into some water, or have a car run over it...?

My plans to make the locker look like a frame job from Tsuruhana-san's crowd went surprisingly well.

It wouldn't work with the girls in my group since they seem like they would stand up for me no matter what.

Diligent-looking girls like Miharu-chan and Nonose-san, or the girls from my

Handicrafts Club on the other hand...

"I feel so bad for Reika-sama. She's been made out to be the culprit..."

"I've never seen Reika-sama harass *anybody*."

"She just happened to be there. How can people be blaming her like that...?"

"Why does Reika-sama have to be suspected like this?"

It didn't take them long at all to net me a bunch of sympathy votes.

My group followed up on it afterwards of course.

"Reika-sama has been framed."

"By whom?"

"Wasn't there some group that told everybody that they were going to replace her?"

"Ehh? They said that?!"

"Takamichi-san said that it wasn't Reika-sama who was responsible, but she never said a certain somebody wasn't. That says it all, don't you think?"

How you behave in everyday life is pretty important, Tsuruhana-san.

Anyhow, pretty much everybody was convinced that it was some plot by Tsuruhana-san to frame me.

And somehow there seemed to be more solidarity in my group now.

I guess it's true what they say about making up an enemy to bring a group together.

In the end nobody ever found out who had done it, but the harassment had cooled off since that day, for now at least.

But hopefully the peace would continue until I was a 3rd year at least.

"Hm hm hm~"

I was happily enjoying tea in the salon until Enjou came along.

“Kisshouin-san, given that tomorrow is White Day, apparently Yukino wants to hand you some sweets in person. Do you think you could find some time tomorrow?”

“Gosh, Yukino-kun does!? Gladly!”

And it was almost spring break so I wanted to visit the other kids before that.

“But spring break is already so close. The kids in primary school are already having half-days.”

“Don’t worry about that. Lately he’s been bringing the boardgames you showed him at his birthday party to the petit salon. Apparently the kids there have all been playing.”

“My.”

The Petit salon, previously filled with children gracefully talking as they sipped tea, was now basically a playhouse?

“I suspect he wants to play them with you, but if you have plans then don’t feel bad about refusing.”

“Plans?”

My plans were the same as always.

Oh, was he worried that I’d be busy because of White Day?

No need to worry, I’m completely free.

“Speaking of which, are you also going on a date tomorrow, Enjou-sama?”

“Basically.”

I was just making conversation, but surprisingly got an answer.

I was a little surprised.

And kind of felt like a loser.

Hmmmm, a date on White Day huh?

...Tsk!

Well how *awfully* nice for *you*.

A dateless woman like me will just go and play cards with the Petit Pivoine then!

“Welcome, Reika-oneesan!”

This place was a soothing paradise.

I entered to Yukino-kun and the other children’s adorable smiles.

Haaah, so warm and fluffy.

“Over here, Reika-oneesan.”

“Why thank you, Yukino-kun.”

My White Day present from him was rusk in a cute little jar.

Rusk is great, isn’t it.

I love it too!

It’s crunchy and light, and you can’t stop eating it!

I decided to just open it now and try a piece.

Mm, yummy!

“How delicious. Thank you for the lovely gift.”

Yukino-kun laughed shyly next to me.

An angel!

Still, despite the lightness in your mouth, rusk was heavy on the calories.

I made a note not to overeat.

After that I talked with him and Mao-chan and stuff about what we were going to be doing during the spring break.

For me, I was going to be taking some cram courses, as well as lessons from Akimi-san on cooking.

She had already taught me a few times before.

Akimi-san was kind and never mocked me, even when she had to teach me things as basic as chopping vegetables or making stock.

With her, it was easy to admit what I didn't know, so I was glad I had come to her.

For now we were just following the recipes and practising different dishes.

Maybe once I had mastered the basics I could start looking for my own flavour.

And then I could start getting popular on the internet with them.

'Give a boost to your romance with Reika's cupid recipes!'

Maybe nikujaga for appealing to the male instinct...

"That sounds so nice, Reika-oneesama. Do you think I could come too?" Mao-chan asked entreatingly.

Come to think of it, she said something similar a while back.

"Hmmm, I shall have to ask Akimi-san for her permission, but how about coming to my house to have a look?"

Mao-chan gave a happy cheer.

How could anyone refuse a cute girl like this!

I sure couldn't!

Yes, it was going to be a bit rough revealing just how bad at cooking I was, but I could always use a vegetable peeler, and to be honest Akimi-san was praising me more these days.

“You’ve gotten really good at cutting vegetables, Reika-san.”

“You’re really fun to teach since you’re so enthusiastic.”

“You’ve got really good taste in food presentation.”

I was the type of person who reacted really well to compliments.

Hearing them made me happy, and want to try harder, so Akimi-san was the perfect teacher for me.

“Reika-oneesan, wanna play a game?” said Yukino-kun as he pulled me by the arm.

Ohh! I’d forgotten about that!

Come to think of it, kids were already playing jenga, cards, and other things here and there around the room.

It was like some high society nursery.

At first I was peacefully playing games like Bozu Mekuri or Concentration, but at some point we started playing Speed instead.

Somehow my memories as the Speed Queen in my old life flared up, and I ended up playing seriously against small children.

I know, I know, it was childish of me.

I’m reflecting on it, but just so you know, I beat them all.

Some of the older boys seemed pretty frustrated about it.

Train harder, boys.

My wish to get to spring break without any further troubles was of no avail.

My propaganda campaign against Tsuruhana-san had pushed her so far that she apparently decided that confronting us in the cafeteria was the answer.

“You’re a scary girl, Reika-sama,” said Tsuruhana-san. “Pinning the blame for your own crimes on *us* without batting an eye.”

“What are you talking about? The one who tried to frame Reika-sama was you!” yelled my group.

Ehhh~?

Come on, not out here, girls...

Just as the two groups were starting to really yell, another group of girls came along.

“Please be quiet.”

They were from the Student Council.

“Haah? External like you lot don’t have the right to tell us what to do,” Tsuruhana-san glared venomously.

“What does this have to do with being an Internal or External Student? We’re the Student Council,” the girl replied.

“And I’m saying that your Student Council doesn’t amount to anything,” she sneered, causing the girl to flush with anger.

Things got even more heated, except now it was a three-way fight.

Come *onnn* guys, let’s just *stop*!

Look, everyone’s looking at us, so let’s just calm down!

They’re seriously all staring!

“Who’s causing problems, Reika-san!?”

Of course that was when Ririna decided to swagger in with her own underlings.

Why did an even *bigger* troublemaker show up!?

Chapter 203

“Ririna...”

The biggest troublemaker of *all* had appeared.

From her expression, she was positively raring to go.

No seriously, somebody had practically sharpied ‘Which bitch-ass needs a smackin’?’ onto her face, it was that obvious.

“I know everything, Reika-san! Somebody’s been putting you through hell with slander. Why didn’t you come to me for help!?”

Because if I came to you for help then something like *this* would happen!

“Well, whatever. So these girls are the enemy, then. I’ll help! Hey, you lot! Pick on somebody your own size!”

I *knew* it!

Stop!

Stop!

Don’t make this any bigger than it has to be!

My feelings failed to reach a single person, however, and in front of my eyes Ririna donned phantom knuckledusters and a deuce deuce.

“Are you serious!? You have nothing to do with this, you first year!”

“I’m Reika-san’s cousin! If you have a problem with her, tell it to *me*!”

“I don’t *care* whose cousin you are! It’s none of your business! Unless of course you were *part* of her plan!”

“We’ve already told you to stop slandering Reika-sama! Who do you think she is!? She’s a member of the Pivoine!”

“The Student Council doesn’t care if she’s Pivoine or not!”

“And we don’t care about *you*! The Student Council should mind its own business!”

“You low-bred Externals *dare* behave like this in front of true-blood Suiran students!?”

“Exactly! You’re just *Externals*!”

“You think that just because you’re part of the Student Council that you can suddenly forget your place!?”

“‘External, External!’ How does attending a school since primary give you the right to think you’re better than us!?”

“Right!? The Internals are basically all idiots, anyway!”

“*What* was that!?”

“*Hey*! Don’t you *dare* ignore me!”

“What the heck!? Let go of me!”

“Kyaah! You’ve done it now, you bitch!”

“Oww! Don’t pull the hair!”

“Get her! Ririna-san! We need to avenge Reika-sama!”

“Ah!? Tsuruhana-san! Those are piercings! That’s a violation of school regulations!”

“Shut it, External! You don’t have a boyfriend because you dress like *that*, you ugly bitch!”

“*What* did you say!?”

A group of rich girls were screaming and shouting, wearing terrifying expressions as they yanked at each others’ hair and clothing.

Hiiiiie!

It was like a vale tudo free-for-all in here!

What happened to Suiran being a good school with good kids!?

“What the hell are you all doing!? Cut that out this instant!” roared Fellow Stalking Horse.

The girls all turned to glare daggers as the crowds parted for him.

Ririna even had a clump of hair in her clenched hand.

When he realised *exactly* what had been going on, Fellow Stalking Horse’s went as stiff as a board.

He was an exceptional Student Council President, true, but no boy would ever want to butt in on a cat fight like this alone.

They began flooding him and showering him with complaints.

“*They* were the ones who picked a fight first!”

“Haah!? That was *you* bitches!”

“As for us, all *we* did was try to stop a pointless quarrel.”

“Stop playing the goodie-two-shoes! You’re the one who *hit* me!”

“Reika-san’s enemies are *my* enemies!” a certain somebody declared.

“Alright! Alright already!” Fellow Stalking Horse shouted. “I get it, so just calm down!”

Each faction regrouped, checking their warriors for harm, and giving them thanks and encouragement.

“So what started all of this?” he asked once they seemed calm enough.

“Tsuruhana-san’s group suddenly picked a fight with Reika-sama.”

“Reika-sama was the one who tried to slander me with false accusations!”

“As part of the Student Council, I was just giving them a warning...”

“We’re supposed to be stopping the trouble,” he sighed. “What good are we if we magnify the issue...?”

There was a pause, and then he turned to Ririna.

“You’re...”

“As Reika-san’s cousin, I couldn’t just ignore her crisis!” Ririna declared grandly.

Fellow Stalking Horse looked at her, and then brought a hand to his forehead.

“Right, it’s time for you to leave...” he said as he chased her off.

“Anyway! If you girls have a problem with each other then talk it out calmly. A group of young ladies getting into a fistfight is ridiculous!”

“President!”

The girls all surrounded him and tried again to bring him to their way of thinking, but another voice interrupted.

“Shut up,” Kaburagi eyed them coldly. “Not only are you an earful, but you’re disgraceful too.”

The cafeteria turned to silence.

The girls in question looked awkward as they flushed in embarrassment.

“We still haven’t discovered the culprit for Takamichi’s locker,” he continued, “so enough causing trouble with your pointless guessing.”

He was overwhelming.

Totally different to the child who threw a tantrum about giving a tiny little blood oath.

“Are we clear?” he asked, prompting.

They all nodded.

Seemingly done with this, Kaburagi turned to leave.

“Please wait!” called Serika-chan.

“U-, Um, Kaburagi-sama!” called Kikuno-chan, as the two of them stood a little fearfully in his way.

“Kaburagi-sama, Reika-sama has never bullied anybody. If you have to believe anything, please believe that!”

“It’s true! Everything with Reika-sama is just a misunderstanding!”

That was surprising...

The pair had been huge fans of Kaburagi as long as I could remember.

They adored everything he had done, as far back as our days in primary.

I’d never have expected them to confront him like that.

They had chosen my side over him.

I was more than a little touched.

Kaburagi looked at them for a little while before giving his reply.

“I *do* believe that.”

With that, Kaburagi left the cafeteria again.

There was silence for a while after he left, before the room exploded with the passionate screams of girls.

“Reika-sama! Kaburagi-sama believes you!”

“Isn’t that great, Reika-sama!?”

I was surrounded by my group as they cheered.

“...Yes. Thank you, Serika-san, Kikuno-san. Everybody else, too,” I told them earnestly.

They all smiled brightly at me.

Really, thank you.

Thanks to Kaburagi’s statement of belief, the last few people who suspected me were convinced as well. As expected of the Emperor.

Back to my other problem though, I wasn’t sure what to do about the tension.

I mean, yes, I had inflamed it with my actions, but still...

Wasn’t there some fun topic to help people forget about the locker incident?

That was the only solution I could think of.

Something that both my girls and Tsuruhana-san’s would really care about...

Oh! I know!

I sacrificed Enjou.

“I have heard that Enjou-sama enjoyed a date with somebody on White Day,” I informed them.

As expected, it erupted into a huge scandal.

Good... Good...

It was better for Suiran to be flooded with talks about romance, rather than talks about conspiracies and ploys, so I spread gossip like there was no tomorrow.

One day I was walking down a hallway, happy at how well my plan had gone, when somebody tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

Enjou stood there, smiling.

“Since I have a debt to you, I’ll overlook things just this once, okay?”

The cold sweat wouldn't stop.

"Anyhow, have a nice day," he chuckled darkly.

Aaaahhh!

Why won't spring break *come* already!?

Chapter 204

It was here!

Finally, the spring break was here!

It was a thorny path getting here.

The rumour strategy backfiring, the tense atmosphere that resulted, trying to change that by using the school idol Enjou, and then immediately being found out by him. That was some scary stuff...

After that, every time we met in the salon or in the hallway, Enjou would give me this smile that sent me trembling.

Stop giving me that look, Enjou.

Yes, it was my fault, but my stomach hurts so stop.

I learnt my lesson this time. It was important to think before you acted.

Spring break was basically an escape from all that.

Of course, I still went to cram school.

Umewaka-kun and co. were doing the spring break course as well.

I still had sessions with my private tutor though, so I spent a bit less time there than they did.

Since this was going to be our last year in school, everybody was preparing for the university entrance exams now. Everyone was studying seriously.

I sat with the others and we chatted for a bit before class began.

Moriyama-san was messaging somebody on her phone the whole time.

Apparently she had a boyfriend now.

It was a boy from her grade at school.

I guess despite how long she had crushed on Umewaka-kun, all the encounters with his Beatrice obsession gave her pause.

That time at the school festival where he started kissing and nuzzling the Beatrice doll in public was really something.

I think it might have been the last straw for her.

Anyway, around that time their school went on an excursion and Moriyama-san started dating a boy that she hit it off with.

That kind of event is a staple for co-ed schools, isn't it~

Kaaah, I'm so jealous!

Coming back to Umewaka-kun though, I wondered if he'd ever get a girlfriend.

I mean Moriyama-san was crushing on him hard and he even scared *her* away.

I turned to have a look at him.

Umewaka-kun noticed my gaze and spoke to me.

"Oh, did you notice?" he pointed at his earring.

The design was round, with two depressions.

At a glance it seemed to be a skull motif, but when I looked carefully it turned out to be dog's nose.

It really suits you, Umewaka-kun.

How silly of me. Why would he need a girlfriend when he already had an everlasting romance with Beatrice?

May they live happily ever after.

Anyway, going back to the spring cram course but Tagaki-kun was in our class.

He probably enrolled before his slip-up during the incident.

Sitting in the classroom, it was obvious that he was terrified of me.

I mean like, it-looked-like-he'd-seen-the-apocalypse-every-time-our-eyes-met terrified.

"Kisshouin-san, what's up with *him*?"

"Hmmm... Something of a misunderstanding, but at the same time not."

According to the rumours, Tagaki-kun had been living every day in fear for his life after his careless comment got me in hot water.

Not that I was still mad after Kaburagi believed me.

The tongue begets disaster, they say.

That was something both Tagaki-kun and I had learned personally.

And speaking of Tagaki-kun, it wouldn't do to leave him like this.

I decided to speak to him at lunch.

"Tagaki-kun," I began gently.

He jumped in his seat and began to apologise madly.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he repeated.

Wha-, *hey*!

"Um, Tagaki-kun..."

"Waaah! I'm sorry! Forgive me! Save me!"

Everyone else was starting to stare.

What the hell.

Didn't it look like I was bullying him now?

Stop that!

"What's *that* guy's problem, Kisshouin-san?"

My friends stared wide-eyed at him.

Don't look at me. I don't get it either.

At any rate, I had to calm him down.

"I am not angry, Tagaki-kun. Shall we calm down a little?"

"I'm sorry! I'm *sorry*!"

Uh, I'm not hitting you so you don't have to cover your head like that.

"Tagaki-kun," Umewaka-kun patted him on the shoulder, "Kisshouin-san has something to say, so could you hear her out first?"

Everyone else joined in too.

"It's okay, calm down~"

"Come on, take a deep breath."

Although he kept his hands on his head, he finally quieted down.

Tagaki-kun slowly looked up at me with teary eyes.

Just how scared of me *was* this guy?

"I accept your apology, so there is no need to be so frightened, Tagaki-kun," I smiled kindly.

He looked even more scared now.

Why!?

“Huh? Did Tagaki-kun do something to you?” Kitazawa-kun asked in interest.

“It was not anything big. Since Tagaki-kun seemed to be hung up about it I wanted to tell him not to worry, but...”

Everyone hummed in thought as they looked at him.

“Hey, Tagaki-kun, are you afraid of Kisshouin-san?” Umewaka-kun asked bluntly.

The boy in question struggled to answer as his eyes swam.

“Hmm~ While we don’t know what the situation’s like at Suiran, Kisshouin-san isn’t really somebody you need to fear like that.”

Everyone else nodded in agreement.

“You really don’t have to be so afraid of her. She’s not a bad girl,” said Moriyama-san, clapping him on the back. “Besides, if Kisshouin-san ever does something to you, I’ll save you!”

Tagaki-kun finally lifted his head from his hands and looked at me properly.

“It cannot be comfortable living in fear like that either,” I said. “How about you forget about that incident and just live normally again?”

I gave him one last smile before returning to my seat.

I had my doubts, but hopefully he’d act a bit more normally now.

I didn’t know how I’d deal with the guilt if he failed his exams because he was feeling pressured about me.

It would be nice if I seemed more approachable.

The next day Tagaki-kun gifted me a whole heap of luxury creme caramel from the food section of an expensive department store.

Apparently the boys had told him that desserts were a good way of apologising to girls.

Thank you very much.

At lunch I invited Tagaki-kun to share them with me, and wouldn't take no for an answer.

He ran away the moment he finished his.

Am I really that scary?

"He's downright terrified of you, isn't he. Where in the Suiran hierarchy are you, anyhow?"

I'm part of an exclusive club with powerful privileges, and happen to lead the largest group of girls in my grade.

Chapter 205

Like I'd promised, today Mao-chan was invited to my cooking lesson with Akimi-san.

Because I wanted to recreate the food that my mum made in my last life, most of the recipes that I was learning from her were for Japanese home-cooking.

And since most of it was brown and boring-looking, I suggested that we do something a bit more interesting for Mao-chan's visit.

After some discussion, we decided that it would be gratin for today.



Gratin is a widespread culinary technique in which an ingredient is topped with a browned crust, often using breadcrumbs, grated cheese, egg and/or butter. In Japan it typically refers to meat or vegetables topped with a layer of bechamel, then cheese, then bread crumbs.

“Wah! I love gratin!” exclaimed Mao-chan in her cute little apron.

Kids do love their western dishes.

First we had to mix the flour and milk until there were no lumps.

I already knew the importance of removing the lumps, thanks to my lessons with Wakaba-chan.

Akimi-san taught us that it would be good to remember how to make the bechamel sauce, because it was used in a lot of other dishes too.

Ohh?

Come to think of it, Mum always used supermarket roux in her dishes, didn't she.

Maybe I could just use that...

I mean, it was delicious, okay?

Besides the gratin we also made minestrone.



Minestrone is a thick soup of Italian origin made with vegetables, often with the addition of pasta or rice, sometimes both. In Japan, minestrone is typically a tomato soup with pasta.

This dish needed vegetables, so I was a little worried.

Somebody was going to have to cut them, and I really didn't want mess it up in front of Mao-chan.

The carrots I managed, because I had practised a lot at home.

I used a vegetable peeler on it, and then cut them into 1 cm cubes.

Always considerate, Akimi-san took care of the things she knew I was bad at, and somehow I managed to save face in front of Mao-chan.

"That's a lovely necklace, Reika-san."

When the two of them realised the pearl necklace was from Imari-sama they began to squeal and compliment him.

I told them a few stories about him and they seemed really taken with him.

Mao-chan had Yuuri-kun so that was one thing, but I really didn't think it would be good for Akimi-san to be too adoring of him.

And Oniisama always grimaces and tells me “Anybody but Imari.”

Apparently beyond just the crazy stories I’d heard about, he had caused countless other incidents.

Imari-sama...

For lunch we had the gratin and minestrone, along with some baguettes that Akimi-san made.

It was delicious!

Bread was good stuff.

I’d been looking for a good bakery, but making it yourself was fun too.

Mao-chan said her mother baked bread too, sometimes.

Hm, maybe I would learn to bake bread next.

Akimi-san told us that making baguettes was difficult, so maybe we’d start with bagels first.

Bagels!

I *loved* bagels!

Bagel sandwiches were great too.

In just the course of the day, Mao-chan had become good friends with Akimi-san.

Akimi-san was gentle and kind, and she was a bit round too, so she was relaxing to be with.

Mao-chan asked if she could come next time when we were making bread, so Akimi-san told her that of course she could.

Oniisama wasn’t at home today, so I told Akimi-san that I’d get a driver to send her home.

Instead, Mao-chan suggested that she drop Akimi-san off as well.

They were really getting along~

The one picking her up turned out to be Ichinokura-san.

“Good afternoon. We’ve really troubled you with Mao-chan today. Thank you for everything, Reika-san.”

“Not at all. Thanks to Mao-chan we all had a great time.”

“Haruto-niisama, this is Narutomi Akimi-san. She was our cooking teacher today!”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Ichinokura Haruto, Mao-chan’s uncle.”

“Ah, I’m Narutomi Akimi...”

She seemed a bit nervous about meeting a stranger.

“Haruto-niisama, can we drop off Akimi-san too? It’s fine, right?” Mao-chan asked.

“Um, Mao-chan, I can catch a taxi...” she demurred shyly, but Ichinokura-san was already answering Mao-chan.

“Of course we can. Akimi-san, please let us drive you home.”

She must have been nervous because instead of some old Sawarabi chauffeur, we ended up with a handsome young man instead.

Mao-chan’s invitation was hard to turn down though, so in the end she agreed and left with the three of them.

Hmmm~

I wondered if Mao-chan was trying to matchmake them.

She was really acting like a meddlesome aunty just now.

Since it was spring break, I decided to visit Wakaba-chan.

It was a bit blunt to just say ‘Let’s hang out’ though, so instead I sent her a message that said,

‘I was thinking of buying some of your cakes. Would it be fine to come over?’

‘Yeah, let’s hang out!’

came the reply.

Man, it was convenient having an excuse like that.

And so today she was waiting for me at the train station again.

“The brats at my home are always asking me, ‘When is Kisshouin-san coming over again?’ you know.”

“‘When is Cornet coming over?’ more like.”

“Ahaha~ Sorry. I keep scolding them about it but they just won’t listen.”

“Nothing to worry about. To be honest I have already resigned myself to it.”

Besides, it sounded closer than the distant-sounding ‘Kisshouin-san’ anyway.

“How were things afterwards?” I asked. “The bullying, I mean.”

“Mmn, nothing really happened since the locker incident. It really blew up, so everyone was being watched too carefully to try anything, I guess,” she said.

“I see. It would be nice if that continued until graduation,” I said.

“It would be,” she agreed.

Since she was the smartest girl in our grade, I think people would have respected her more if she seemed a bit more together.

I think people thought she was an easy target because she looked a bit dopey or undignified sometimes.

“It’s pretty hot, huh~”

Like just now. Her mouth was still hanging open.

She was the most relaxed-looking person I knew.

“Say, Takamichi-san? Your mouth is still open,” I couldn’t help but say.

“Wahwah!”

In a panic she clamped it shut.

“You seem to have a habit of that...”

It was a little rude, but I tried asking about it anyway.

Maybe she hadn’t even noticed herself.

In that case, addressing it would be the first step to making her look capable.

“Ahhh, yeah... It’s because I have a bad habit of clenching my teeth.”

That was surprising.

“Clenching your teeth?”

“Yeah. When I sleep I tend to grind them, so I actually have a line on the inside of my mouth where my teeth meet. My dentist told me that it would wear down my teeth in the long run, so it would be better to address the habit while I was young. Since then I loosen my jaw a bit whenever I remember.”

What the hell!?

So her stupid-looking expression actually had such a reasonable explanation behind it!

“It wouldn’t be a problem if I could just keep my lips shut, but my whole mouth opens when I’m not paying attention,” she laughed.

Still, it wouldn’t make sense to tell her to stop doing it then.

“So your gums have a clench mark?”

“It’s pretty obvious in the mirror. It looks like a horizontal white line. I can feel it with my tongue too.”

Huh.

I curiously licked my own mouth and found that I had one too.

Eh!?

Was I clenching my teeth as well!?

Maybe it was the stress...

It wasn’t because I had fat cheeks or anything, right?

But when I ate, sometimes I ended up biting them...

Kanta-kun greeted us when we arrived.

I followed the recipe and the fondant au chocolat turned out well, I reported.

He pridefully huffed that of course it would.

I commented that I was thinking of learning to bake bread, and got a whole lot of points to be careful about when baking it.

Apparently it was quite similar to baking desserts.

And then again, I got an earful about the importance of following the recipe.

Okay, okay, I get it already.

The three of us had a chat, and ended up deciding to just make something since I was here already.

I was excitedly discussing what to make with them when Wakaba-chan’s mother came into the house from the storefront.

“Wakaba, Kaburagi-kun is out front in the store.”

Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!

Chapter 206

Oh no, oh no! What was I supposed to do now!?

He could *not* know that I was here!

I shook my head furiously at Wakaba-chan.

She nodded in understanding before leaving for the entrance.

I'm counting on you, Wakaba-chan!

My palms felt sweaty, and my heart thumped while I waited.

"What's wrong, Cornet?" Kanta-kun asked.

"I do not want Kaburagi-sama to know that I am here," I said.

"Why? Don't you go to the same school?" he asked.

"That is exactly the problem," I replied.

Lord in heaven, please protect me!

Kanta-kun looked at me for a moment before sinking into thought.

"In that case, let's watch them in secret."

Ehhh!?

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, so I agreed.

He led the way into Wakaba-chan's room on the 2nd floor.

"Kanta-kun, is this not Takamichi-san's room? Should we be here without her permission?"

“It’s fine. Look, I knew they’d be down there.”

Her window overlooked the back of the store, which was where the two of them happened to be chatting.

Wakaba-chan was holding a bouquet that she definitely hadn’t had earlier.

I wonder if Kaburagi had brought it.

The two of us peeped, one-eyed, through the small gap in the window curtains.

“...I haven’t found them yet. But I will.”

“It’s fine, already. I don’t want it to blow up any further.”

Mn?

From what I heard just now, were they talking about finding the culprit behind the locker?

Ah, but Wakaba-chan didn’t want her family to know about the bullying, so maybe it wouldn’t be good to have Kanta-kun here...

“Did something happen to Neechan?” whispered Kanta-kun.

I hummed noncommittally.

I couldn’t think of anything on the spot.

What now.

Maybe I could distract him somehow.

“Say, Kanta-kun? Does he come over often?”

“About once a month to buy cake.”

Ugehhh.

Monthly visits?

This was definitely not the last time I was hiding then.

Damned Kaburagi, you sure have been busy in places I wasn't looking.

Come to think of it, the teddy bear on the shelf over there was his Christmas present too.

"Hey, hey, are Kaburagi-san and Neechan going out?"

"I suspect not, but..."

"But Kaburagi-san definitely likes Neechan, right?"

"Hmmm. Did Takamichi-san say anything?"

"She keeps saying that he doesn't and gets mad when we bring it up."

"I see."

At some point the two of them had started chatting about the break, and the mock exams we had just before it. As expected of our top students.

But although they were talking about studying, for some reason Kaburagi sounded oddly cheerier than usual.

Wow, he even laughed.

Mn, it's nice being able to talk to your crush, isn't it.

"By the way, Takamichi, what are you doing over the spring break?"

"Helping out at the store, studying at the library, that kind of thing."

"I see. Say-"

Whatever it was he was going to say, it was cut off by Natsumi-chan coming back home.

"I'm home. Ah, Kaburagi-san, hello."

"Hello there."

Wow, so you've been over enough that her little sister remembers your name, damned Kaburagi.

"Oneechan, Oneechan," she suddenly said to Wakaba-chan. "Is Coro-chan over?"

Uewaaaaahaah!

For a moment I went blind.

That almost gave me a heart attack.

"Oi! Are you okay, Cornet!?"

Huh. Apparently my eyes had rolled back into my head.

"Coro-chan...?" Kaburagi muttered curiously.

Oww! My stomach!

"Did you have a guest over?" he asked.

"Umm, yeah. Actually, a friend came over today! Nacchan, go inside, okay?"

"Okaaay."

"I see. A friend came over..." he muttered again.

Hey, you better not be thinking of inviting yourself in as well.

You better not be!

Read the mood, Kaburagi!

"Then I'll be heading back now."

He read the mood!

"Thanks for going out of your way to visit. Ah, and for the flowers, too."

"I was just in the area. Love the cakes, too."

As if you were just in the area!

And you even brought a bouquet!

Think of a less obvious excuse, Kaburagi!

Huh. But had I not been here, then his plan to spend time with her would have worked.

Oops?

Kaburagi gave a casual wave to her before getting into his car and leaving.

Haaaah.

But wow, that surprise attack from Natsumi-chan really did a number on my stomach.

I decided to ask the whole family to only refer to me as Coro-chan from now on.

And just now Wakaba-chan called me her friend, didn't she. Do you think she meant it?

After seeing Kaburagi off, Wakaba-chan came back into the house and placed the flowers in a vase.

"Oneechan's been learning flower arrangement at school. She's always teaching me, you know?" her little sister said proudly.

"Hey-! Can you please not say such embarrassing things to Kisshouin-san?" complained Wakaba-chan.

But Natsumi-chan's next comment sent her into an embarrassed panic.

"Why? You tell us how to drink tea too. Gotta turn the tea bowl in your hands, right?"

So Wakaba-chan had been telling her family about what she learnt at Suiran.

It was nice to know she was enjoying the lessons, then.

Wakaba-chan turned to me and laughed shyly.

“Ehehe, actually I’ve been thinking about taking calligraphy in 3rd year, now that I’ve tried flower arrangement and tea ceremony.”

It was nice that she was looking forward to it, but wouldn’t she just get ink poured on her head?

Natsumi-chan said that she was hungry so Wakaba-chan was going to make okonomiyaki.

Okonomiyaki!

Wouldn’t this be the first time in my current life!?



Okonomiyaki is a Japanese savoury pancake containing a variety of ingredients which vary based on personal taste, and more widely, region.

The most ‘standard’ types will have cabbage and meats and stuff inside, topped with shaved bonito flakes (katsuobushi). That is then topped with a sweet thickened Worcestershire sauce and mayonnaise. Typically cooked on a hot plate or flat grill.

Wah, I could see the katsuobushi bonito flakes waving in the steam!

And the smell of the okonomiyaki sauce and mayonnaise was irresistible!

I loved battered food like okonomiyaki and takoyaki!

Wakaba-chan’s other little brother came home too, so we had a little okonomiyaki party with a hot plate, cooking and then eating, cooking and then eating.

The one that I flipped myself broke apart completely. Why.

Kanta-kun gave me one look and benched me from the cooking team. Sob.

Wow, Wakaba-chan was just demolishing that cabbage with her knife.

“Want one more, Kisshouin-san?”

“No, I am afraid I am quite full. Ahh, but if there are still some ingredients left over, then perhaps just a bite...”

This was so fun.

Being here was so comfortable.

“It feels as though I always make you treat me,” I said apologetically.

Before I knew it, every visit to Wakaba-chan’s house had involved her feeding me.

Just how shameless was I?

Maybe I ought to bring them some nice meat next time.

“Seriously, don’t worry about it~ Everyone has a great time eating with you. Come over again, sometime?”

“Thank you.”

Geez, if you say something like that I’ll be back over in no time, you know?

“Speaking of which, about Kaburagi-sama...”

“Ahh, yeah. He was in the neighbourhood so he came to buy some cakes. Also he came to tell me that he hadn’t found the culprit behind the locker yet.”

Yes, I know. I was eavesdropping, after all...

“Do you want to find out who it was?”

“Not really. I just don’t want it to get any bigger. I told Kaburagi-kun the same thing, and that he didn’t have to keep looking.”

“I see.”

If *he* was involved, it was bound to get bigger after all.

“Takamichi-san, what do you think of Kaburagi-sama?”

“Eh!?”

She looked really startled to hear that.

Should I not have asked?

“Erm, I mean, I was simply wondering what you thought of his character...”

In the manga she would have already been head-over-heels for him, with story arcs about misunderstandings and overcoming obstacles.

The real pair wouldn't be overcoming anything, I didn't think.

“Hmmm~ At first I thought he was really unapproachable, like somebody from a different world, you know? But my impression changed after talking with him for just a bit.”

“How do you mean?”

“Hmmm... Well that time with the car accident he was really earnest with his apologies, and came to take me to the hospital each day.”

“Is that not the normal response?”

“I'm not sure. I guess I was just impressed that he didn't try to solve it with money and wash his hands of it.”

“Hmmm~”

“We talked quite a bit during those visits. I was surprised that he'd laugh at jokes told by someone like me. I mean, this was the Emperor of Suiran, you know!?”

Yeah, but that nickname came from a children's cavalry battle.

Not that an External Student like Wakaba-chan would know.

“Anyway, I guess I just felt a bit closer to him after that. It’s a bit strange. He’s usually so mature, but sometimes he acts just like a kid.”

Oho?

So the way Wakaba-chan saw him was just like the Kaburagi from the manga then.

Don’t tell me he actually had a chance?

She was spinning things in an awfully positive way though.

Rather than “sometimes acts just like a kid” I’d go further and say ‘his mental age is lower than Kanta-kun’s’.

I *really* wanted to ask if she liked him or not, but that was definitely prying too much.

She looked so startled earlier.

Aah, but I really wanted to know...

“What’s wrong?”

“Eh? Nothing. Are you going to be studying at the library during the spring break?”

“Yeah. Hmm? Did I mention that to you? Anyway, the kids are too noisy at home, so I like to study at the library nearby. Sometimes I go a bit further and travel to a bigger library too. Mizusaki-kun told me about it a while back. It’s even got a café.”

“My, Mizusaki-kun did?”

Studying together...?

“Do you study with Mizusaki-kun in the library too?”

“Sometimes. Usually I just go by myself though. Ah, but we’re planning on meeting there and studying again.”

Wasn’t that the library date that I was dreaming about for myself?

Geez, Wakaba-chan!

“The truth is that we’ve been talking about claiming the 1st and 2nd ranks for the Student Council. Taking down the Pivoine and all that. Ah, that was just a joke though! We’re not really trying to overthrow the Pivoine! Sorry, I hope I didn’t offend.”

“Not at all. But Kaburagi-sama and Enjou-sama will be tough to beat, you know?”

“That’s true~”

Kaburagi!

The distance between Fellow Stalking Horse and Wakaba-chan is steadily closing without you realising, you know!?

This isn’t the time to be pretending to buy cake, you know!?

“But yeah. Since coming to Suiran, I’ve really realised how different a person can be from your first impression once you talk with them a little.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. When I first entered the school I never would have thought we’d become so close, Kisshouin-san.”

“I see.”

She thought we were close.

Wah, that was really nice to hear.

And earlier she told Kaburagi that her friend was over.

Maybe she really considered me her friend.

“Did I come off as such an atrocious person?”

“That’s not what I thought at all! It’s just that, you know, like Kaburagi-kun you seemed to be like someone from another world.”

“And now? Do you still think of me like that?”

“Nope. Although I can’t quite say you’re from my world either.”

“Oh? I would be overjoyed to consider you a friend, though...”

“Really? Ehehe, to be honest I’ve already considered you one for a long time now.”

Wakaba-chan!

I emotionally took her hands into mine.

After that I advised her to change her mind about the calligraphy club and we said goodbye in front of the ticket gates.

“Come again, sometime~ We’ll all be waiting.”

“Thank you!”

A gale passed us by, and fluttered my hair in the wind.

Ah, my hair kind of smelt like okonomiyaki!

I had better take a bath when I got home.

Still, today was a great day!

I took out my phone while I was on the train and realised I had a message from Kaburagi.

‘I want to talk about what we discussed earlier.’

Ugeh.

Heading to Wakaba-chan’s house, and then immediately messaging me about advice, huh?

What a botherrrr.

Hm!?

Don’t tell me he realised that I was Coro-chan!?

Still, as bothersome as this was, I was the one who got in his way today, so I felt just a little bit guilty.

Especially after seeing how happy he seemed to be around her.

I guess Kaburagi wanted to spend time with Wakaba-chan as well.

...Sorry.

I decided to be especially generous.

‘Rather than text, let us speak over the phone. It will have to be quick, however.’

His replied said:

‘In that case, let’s take our time and talk at the sakura-viewing party.’

Haaaaah!?

When the hell did I end up RSVP-ing for the Kaburagi family flower-viewing event!?

Chapter 207

Due to how quickly the flowers stop blooming, as well as various legends and myths (and classic literature) regarding them, sakura are connected to the concept of death in Japanese folklore.

There lie cadavers buried under the cherry blossoms!

This is a truth that you must accept. For how else could the flowers of the cherry tree be so magnificent in their bloom? I spent the past several days feeling terribly ill at ease, as I was unable to accept such a beauty. But now, at last, the truth has finally sunk in. There lie cadavers buried under the cherry blossoms. You must accept this.

My house is one that contains a multitude of tools and implements—so why then, from among such trinkets and baubles, did the blade of a safety razor come to me like a vision to a clairvoyant every night on my way home? You say you know not why, whereas I myself cannot comprehend it—the two of which verily amount to the same thing.

A flowering tree, on the other hand, gives forth its essence when it reaches that stage known as full bloom, and in doing so, it emanates a mysterious aura comparable to the state of perfect stillness approached by a fast-spinning top, or perhaps the fleeting sensory impressions roused by a spectacular musical performance, or something like the afterglow that follows the burning act of consummation. It is this beauty, wondrous and vivacious, that never ceases to captivate the human spirit.

Nonetheless, yesterday and the day before, it was the selfsame thing that caused my heart to fall under an intense spell of gloom. I was unable to accept such a beauty. On the contrary, I became anxious and fell into a state of melancholy, and a feeling of emptiness overtook me. But now, at long last, I understand.

You see, beneath the splendor of those cherry trees blooming in profusion, cadavers had been buried one by one, if you can imagine for a moment. Then, soon enough, you'll understand just what sort of anxiety I'd been feeling.

The cadavers of horses, the cadavers of dogs and cats, and it seems, the cadavers of human beings too. Rotting cadavers, crawling with maggots, reeking of a most intolerable stench, all the while seeping a liquid so pure and clear. The cherry tree, as if it were the rapacious octopus, extends its roots outward to grasp. Like the feeding tentacles of the sea anemone, its roots enfold to partake of that liquid.

What could form such a petal? What was behind the creation of such a stamen? I had envisioned it in dreamlike detail: The roots had gathered silently, matter-of-factly, to siphon that pure, clear liquid into its vascular system.

How you must be grimacing at the very thought! Not a very pretty way of looking at things, is it? Finally, I had come to see the cherry blossoms for what they were, and it freed me from what had been an unsettling mystery yesterday and the day before.

A few days earlier, I had descended into a nearby ravine, scrambling down the rocks. There in the splashing water, hither and thither, doodlebugs were coming into being in the manner of the birth of Venus herself. I watched them soar into the hollow where, as you may know, they perform their beautiful mating ritual. After walking a little further, I came across something horrifying. On the banks of the river, where the shallows ought to have been, there was no such water to be seen. A brilliant shimmer resembling an oil slick drifted across the entire surface. You must be wondering what it was. There, the countless thousands of cadavers of doodlebugs perforated the water's surface. They lay piled in mounds, their wings curling in the sunlight, glistening like spilled oil. There, after they had finished spawning, became their grave.

At the sight alone, I felt as if I had suffered a blow to the chest. In bearing witness to the gradual process of decay that appeared to be taking place in that grave of doodlebugs, I had tasted a cruel delight.

There was not a single joyous thing to be found in this ravine. The warbler and the tit, the pale sunlight, and saplings too, were but a distant notion. That tragic fate, it seemed to me, was unavoidable. It was then that the picture became clear in my mind for the first time: It was a counterbalance. My heart had been pining for melancholy as if I were an evil spirit. That state of melancholy had been brought to an end, and now my mind was at peace once more.

By now, your armpits must be damp with sweat, just as mine are. Nothing to be ashamed of. After all, they are certainly no stickier than semen. And on that note, let us conclude

our melancholy.

Alas, there lie cadavers buried under the cherry blossoms!

As for what on earth brought about such a wild flight of fancy involving cadavers, it appears to be anyone's guess. That it may be part and parcel of the cherry blossoms is a notion I cannot seem to shake out of my head, no matter how I try.

I believe I have hereby earned the right, like the many locals flocking to the festivities taking place under those flowering trees, to drink merrily in celebration of the cherry blossom viewing season!

– *translated by Bonnie Huie from Kajii Motojirou's 'Under the Cherry Blossoms'*

My parents thought that since I went last year, I was *obviously* going to the flower viewing party again.

Ask me first! Say something at least!

I bet they kept it on the down-low on purpose!

I didn't wanna go.

But neither did I have the courage to try getting food poisoning again.

Never again, Reika.

I seriously thought I would die.

I swear I saw a bright light at the end of a tunnel...

Okaasama was determined to pair me up this year so she enthusiastically dressed me in a furisode.



A style of kimono distinguishable by its long sleeves. Furisode are the most formal style of kimono worn by young unmarried women in Japan.

Cherry blossoms at night, and a furisode.

Scary...

Please, no.

Maybe if it rained then all the sakura would be washed away, along with the party.

The skies were clear.

Oniisama was busy with work, so he'd be arriving later.

He was busy quite a lot, recently.

He still hadn't taken me out to eat like he promised for White Day either.

"My! Reika-san! Thank you so much for coming!" greeted Mrs. Kaburagi, with literally open arms.

As usual, she was eye-catching and beautiful.

And Chairman Kaburagi still had that mature adult charm!

His legs were so much longer than Otousama's!

And he wasn't overweight, either!

Haah, so cool...

Anyway, after Madam Kaburagi gave me some truly ridiculous praise for my furisode, the topic changed to her son.

"I hear that that boy actually became the President of the Pivoine. Will that surly kid really be able to manage?"

"Masaya-sama is very popular, so I do not believe there is anything to worry about."

"You think? He isn't causing you any problems, Reika-san?"

"Heavens, no. Masaya-sama is competent and always has it together. And his grades are always at the top, and..."

Since we weren't all that close I was struggling to find things to praise him for.

Hmmm...

Good points, good points... What are his good points...?

Too bad. Nothing comes to mind.

"Don't hesitate to let me know if that stupid boy of mine causes you any trouble. I'll really let him have it."

"My... Ohohoho..."

He was causing me trouble right now, actually.

"Anyway, please look after Masaya, okay?"

"I am in his care..."

I really didn't want to look after him though.

Uu, even my smile had gone stiff.

The Kaburagi pair gave me brilliant smiles before leaving to greet other guests.

After that, Otousama brought me around the venue to greet people.

It was exhausting keeping this act up...

After we were done greeting my parents' closer acquaintances, I was finally given my freedom.

Recently a lot of people had been recommending their sons to me, so I was having a rough time dodging all the bullets.

Thanks to that I had no appetite, despite the feast before me.

I picked up some sakura jelly and helped myself to a few bites while I took a breather.



Oh. This was pretty good.

“Good evening, Kisshouin-san.”

“...Gokigen’yoh, Enjou-sama.”

Someone thoroughly unpleasant had come my way.

“So you’re wearing a furisode this time, in... deep scarlet, I think you call this? It suits you. You look lovely tonight.”

“Thank you very much...”

Haah, his smile was suspicious...

I wonder if he was holding a grudge after that White Day rumour.

I just wanted to make a break for it...

“Aren’t you going to look at the flowers?”

“I admired them up-close not too long ago. At any rate, I think that the night-time sakura should be enjoyed from a little further away.”

I could hear the guests praising the weeping sakura again. It had bloomed as gorgeously as last year.



Weeping Sakura

And the yoshino cherries had bloomed just as well.

It almost looked like another world, which to be honest was a little scary.

“I think I know what you mean. Don’t the sakura seem a bit scary at night? It’s almost like they bloomed by using human lifeblood as fertiliser. Say, isn’t there a tale about burying-”

“A corpse under the roots of a sakura tree!”

Exactly! *Exactly!*

Sakura are scary at night, right!?

I mean I like sakura, and they’re beautiful at night, but it’s because they’re so beautiful that it creeps me out!

Why?

Why did anybody think it would be a good idea to have a night-time banquet under the sakura?

“You know, when I read Kajii Motojirou’s poem, I thought, ‘I know exactly what he means.’ There’s just this indescribable discomfort when you see them in the night like

this, isn't there?"

Yeah! Yeah!

I know what you mean!

"But they hardly seem so frightening in the daytime, do they?"

"It's because of the way the flowers seem to float in the darkness. It feels like you'll get pulled in too."

"That makes sense."

"The weeping sakura here isn't too bad, since it's just barely 50 years old. But as for those sakura that have lived for hundreds of years... I can only imagine how much human blood they've drunk."

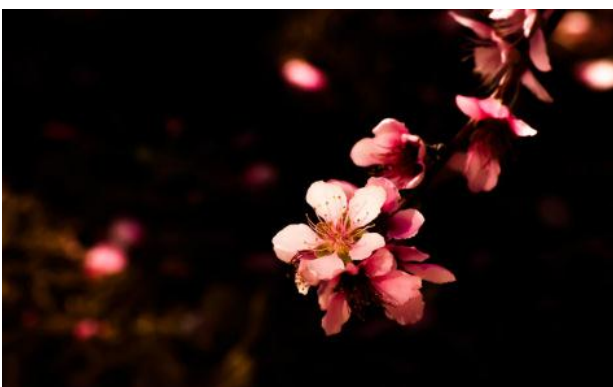
"You are scaring me, so please stop!"

You're going to make me imagine it.

"How mysterious. Even though they are all flowers, neither the plum nor the peach blossoms feel at all scary at night, do they?"



Ume plum blossoms at night.



Peach blossoms at night.

“Shhh. If Masaya’s mum hears you say that she’s going to plan something big, and all because ‘Reika-san likes peach and plum blossoms’ okay?”

Oh dear.

I quickly clamped my mouth shut.

Madam Kaburagi loved her events, so I could actually see her doing it.

Enjou smiled at me in amusement.

“But as scared as you seem to be of the sakura at night, you’re fond of sweets made from them, no? For example, sakuramochi.”

Why and how did he know this?



Sakuramochi is a Japanese sweet consisting of sweet pink-colored rice cake (mochi) with a red bean paste center, and wrapped in a pickled cherry blossom leaf. Eaten during the spring, especially on hinamatsuri, or at flower viewing parties. The ball-style is endemic to the Kansai region, while the wrap style is the traditional style for the Kantou region, including Tokyo.

Flower-themed sweets from the West tasted a bit strange, and I wasn’t sure what I thought of them. Rose jam for example.

The Japanese equivalents on the other hand, I was quite fond of.

Sakuramochi for example, or umegaemochi.



Umegaemochi are roasted rice cakes with red beans inside, branded with an ume plum blossom design.

Huh. It was all mochi.

“Yes. I enjoy eating them because of how festive they are. It really drives home that spring is here. I think this is the same for all the desserts of each season.”

I made very sure to emphasise that I wasn’t some glutton character.

Didn’t mean I wasn’t gulping down green tea at home as I nommed on sakuramochi though!

“I see. Wow, you’re so refined, Kisshouin-san.”

That’s right. I *am* refined. I’m not a glutton at all.

Damned Enjou.

I could see the laughter in his eyes.

He didn’t believe me in the slightest, did he?

“As expected of you, Kisshouin-san. No wonder you seem to be enjoying that sakura jelly so much.”

See? There he goes.

I had to get back at him somehow.

“Speaking of which, Masaya was looking for you.”

“Is that so?”

So Kaburagi was serious about talking about his love troubles in the middle of this huge crowd?

“Speaking of which, are you not together with Kaburagi-sama this evening? How novel.”

“Why does it feel like you think of us as a set?”

“Well, you two *are* famous for being *awfully* intimate...”

“Come on, you wouldn’t call that intimate, right? Kisshouin-san, did you just choose that wording to mess with me?”

Ah, did I go too far with my teasing?

This snake could show his true colours.

Oh dear.

Was he going to do it?

Was he going to attack!?

While I was looking at him guardedly, somebody else appeared.

“Here you are, Shuu.”

Coming in from my five was a white hand that softly took Enjou’s arm.

It was Yuiko-san.

So she was here too...

“Yuiko.”

“I was worried when you suddenly disappeared like that, you know?” she looked up at him, leaning into his shoulder.

Yuiko-san, beautiful and fragile, had drawn the attention of all the males around us.

“You seemed to be having fun with those guys, so I thought it would be fine to step away.”

“My, is somebody jealous?”

“Who knows.”

I looked around at all the men staring jealously at Yuiko-san and Enjou.

Apparently they had all been fussing over her until very recently.

Unfortunately they didn’t stand a chance against Enjou.

The two of them were picture perfect, after all.

Enjou gently tapped the hand on his arm.

“Yuiko, this is Kisshouin Reika-san. She’s in my grade at school.”

“Kisshouin... Reika-san?” she asked as she distractedly turned my way.

Big, dark eyes took me in.

I shivered a little.

“You know about Yuiko, don’t you? She’s a relative of mine. Uryuu Yuiko.”

“Gokigen’yoh. My name is Kisshouin Reika,” I smiled, as confidently as possible.

“Uryuu Yuiko. Have we... perhaps met before...?”

“Why, yes. At the Suiran School Festival.”

Languid eyes gazed at me for a while, before Yuiko smiled softly.

“Ah, I remember now. You were wearing a lovely china dress, no? I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

“Huhu,” she laughed, seemingly pleased with hitting the mark.

That smile had entranced everyone around us.

“Hey, Shuu? I’m a bit thirsty.”

“Then shall we go get something for you to drink? Kisshouin-san, will...”

“I think I shall admire the sakura from a little closer. Please excuse me, Enjou-sama, Yuiko-san.”

Enjou frowned faintly.

Yuiko-san looked at me again with those jet-black eyes of hers, and smiled at me.

Good joke, Enjou. Who on earth would go anywhere with *you* two?

Scaryyy.

To escape as quickly as possible I busted out my ultimate skill, power-walking, but my furisode was making it impossible!

I messed up!

A penguin!

I looked like a penguin right now!

Ahh, and somehow I could feel Yuiko-san’s eyes on me from behind...

Happy thoughts, Reika, happy thoughts.

Fan art by moya. Relevant chapters are linked for your convenience.

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小1
サマーパーティー



- シャーベットグリーンのフレアドレス
- 髪に 白い生花
- け。こう日焼け
- ヒールのある華奢なサンダル

Primary School Year 1: Summer Party

- Sherbet-green dress
- White flower in hair
- Rather tan
- Elegant sandals with heels

高1
サマーパーティー



- シフォン生地が重なった
パウダーピンクのドレス
- かわいい系

High School 1st Year: Summer Party

- Powder pink layered chiffon dress
- Cute design

高1 観桜会



- リボン付シャンパン
ゴールドのフレアワンピース
- 桜色のネイル
- 桜モチーフのヘアアクセ

High School 1st Year: Flower-Viewing Party

- Ribboned flare dress in champagne gold
- Nails are sakura pink
- Sakura motif hair accessory

高2 蛍狩



- 水浅葱色の紹の着物
- まとめ髪

High School 2nd Year: Firefly Catching

- Turquoise kimono
- Hair done up

高2
吉祥院の会社パーティー



• ワインレッドのドレス

High School 2nd Year: Kisshouin
Company Party
– Wine red dress

高2
観桜会



• 深緋色の振袖

High School 3rd Year: Flower-Viewing
Party
– Deep scarlet furisode

高3
七夕会



- 白や薄青のオーガンジーを重ねた繊細なデザインのドレス
- 黒のストール

High School 3rd Year: Tanabata

- Intricately designed white and light blue layered organdy dress
- Black scarf

Chapter 208

Bringing your lover along to view the sakura, huh?

Tch, what an eyesore.

To begin with, they remembered to hold this happy flower viewing event, but not the Festival of Appeasing the Flowers?

From ancient times, the end of March, when the sakura bloomed, necessitated a purification ritual to appease the evil gods of pestilence.

That's right.

This was spring. A most terrifying season, when the gods of pestilence most exercised their power.

Making out? Flirting with your lover at a time like this...?

Those louts were just *asking* for divine retribution! Kiii!

Out of sight of the two, my cowardice had transformed into hatred.

What the hell was that attitude?

Acting as though I was some kind of third wheel...!

As if that wasn't enough, my anger had now made me hungry.

You think I would let the tightness of my obi stop me!?

I grabbed some food and sat myself down in the closest chair.

As I sat there, people came to chat with me from time to time.

Some of them were my parents' acquaintances.

Others, I knew because of the circles I moved in as a Pivoine.

More importantly, for some reason they really believed in the rumour that I was a fathercon, and made comments to that effect.

Sometimes older men even asked me for help, like,

“My teenage daughter is really cold to me these days. What should I do...?”

In the end I just gave them some vague advice.

Don't make lame dad jokes.

Pay attention to your appearance.

Don't go on and on about stories from when you were young, especially if you're lecturing them.

Don't leer at young women.

Praise her, but don't try to flatter her too much.

Basically stuff like that, and all of it with Kaburagi's stylish gentleman of a dad in mind.

Any girl would be proud to have a dad like that...

Gasp!

Bad Reika!

You need to accept reality! The *tubby tanuki* over there is your father!

After facing reality, I went back to eating when two beautiful women came my way.

“Reika-chan, it's been a while!”

“Aira-sama! Yurie-sama!”

Uwahh!

It really *had* been a while.

Although we still messaged each other on occasion, Aira-sama had gotten even busier since her 3rd year in university started.

But wow, the two of them were as gorgeous as ever.

I was really happy to see them!

“Have the two of you been well? You must be positively swamped.”

“Yeah. You really need to commit to a path when you’re our age, so everyone has their own stuff to do,” said Aira-sama.

“Have you two already decided on what you want to do in the future?”

The two of them shared a glance and broke into hopeless smiles.

“I mean, I’ve got something that I want to do, you know? But my parents are adamant about me joining the family company, or the company of one of their good friends,” said Aira-sama.

“My parents don’t agree with what I want, so I’m having a lot of trouble as well,” said Yurie-sama.

They let out a huge sigh.

Finding a job was hard stuff, wasn’t it.

And when it came to the parents of rich women, they probably didn’t think of this as much more than decoration for one’s marriage profile.

Of the girls from Suiran that actually joined the workforce, most just landed a job through connections, and plenty just treated it as something to do until they could get married.

That made Aira-sama and Yurie-sama all the more admirable for trying to strike it out on their own.

I didn’t want to join my family’s company either.

I'd just be nothing more than the chairman's daughter.

I'd be given a wonderful position, but they'd tread on eggshells around me, and I'd basically be isolated.

And the political marriage that lay at the end of that road?

Ueghhh~

I didn't want my family to crumble, but I wasn't fond of that option either.

I was going to marry for love!

"Yurie, if it comes down to it, wanna run off overseas with me?" asked Aira-sama.

"What the heck are you saying?" Yurie-sama laughed.

The two of them really had it rough.

"Hey, hey, more importantly. Reika-chan, I hear that something interesting's been going on with Masaya."

The two of them sat down on either side of me and leaned in, eyes gleaming for gossip.

They seemed to be enjoying this quite a bit.

"Interesting, you say?" I asked.

"He's found a girl that he likes," said Aira-chan.

"Do you know who it is, Reika-san?" Yurie-sama followed up.

"Eh!?"

How did *they* know!?

Did Kaburagi tell them!?

"Going by your expression, it seems that you do, huh?"

“Did you hear this from Kaburagi-sama?” I asked.

“Tell her, Yurie.”

“He was all nervous at Christmas, so I suspected. I asked him, ‘Have you found a girl you like?’ and he actually said ‘I did...’! Geez, when he came to my house he even suddenly started looking through my women’s fashion magazines, and around Valentine’s he got all down. *Such* an open book~”

The two of them guffawed together.

“I mean, when he gave up on Yurie I’d already suspected it was because he’d found someone else.”

“It *was* pretty suspicious, come to think of it,” mused Yurie-sama.

“Do you know who it is?” I asked.

“An External girl, right? Do you know what kind of girl she is, Reika-chan?” asked Aira-sama.

“Well, yes...” I said evasively.

Since I didn’t know what Wakaba-chan wanted, it wouldn’t do to say anything careless.

Diseases come in through the mouth, but disasters come out of it.

After chatting for a while longer, the two of them left after some other senpai from the Pivoine went calling for them.

Since that was the case, I decided to move a little to help with the digestion.

I wandered the area for a while when I happened to make eye contact with Kaburagi, who was surrounded by girls.

Oh.

“Kisshouin.”

He immediately excused himself and headed my way.

“Gokigen’yoh, Kaburagi-sama. Thank you very much for extending your invitation to me this evening.”

“Yeah, thanks for coming.”

Kaburagi led me near the wall, where even the sakura couldn’t be seen anymore.

Nobody was nearby here, so the chances of being overheard were slim.

As expected of the host’s son. He knew the location quite well.

“Well, sit down.”

“Then excuse me... Well then, what did you want to discuss?”

“Well that was blunt. Basically... I want to talk about her.”

“I understand.”

What else, right?

“Starting at the beginning, the two of us were involved in a little accident during the summer.”

Kaburagi began telling me about how the two of them became closer, and that sometimes he went to her house to buy cakes.

Mhm. I knew it all, already.

“But things haven’t progressed since then.”

“Haah.”

“What do you think I should do?”

Eh!? *That’s* where he was going to start!?

“Why not just confess?” I suggested.

“Wha-, you-!” he spluttered.

You were about to call me an idiot, weren't you?

"Not yet! That's still way off!"

"I see."

Kaburagi was so flustered that his eyes were swimming.

Wow, as a man, this guy was even more useless than I thought.

"Well then how about inviting her to a date to deepen your bonds?"

"I thought about that too. But I just can't find the right timing to. She's pretty busy in her own right. And besides, I have a lot of things on my schedule too. Like just the other day I'd finally found some time, but she already had a friend over so I couldn't invite her out."

Ah, that was me...

"Why did you not contact her beforehand?"

"Uh, I wanted to surprise her..."

You're bothering people by doing that!

People like me! I was so surprised that my stomach hurt, okay!

"I think that showing up unannounced and uninvited can only cause trouble for the other party."

"Really...?"

"Most certainly! From now on, please do not forget to schedule an appointment with her first!"

Mn. Because if I bumped into you while I was at Wakaba-chan's, it would really cause me problems.

Actually I would prefer that he never came at all, but that was just me being selfish.

If I had to compromise though, then I wanted some forewarning at least.

Seriously.

“But I haven’t actually been coming there to meet her. I’ve been going there to buy cakes,” he said.

“As an excuse to meet her.”

“Well... yeah,” he admitted.

“In that case, why not tell her that you were planning to come down someday to buy some cakes again, and casually ask her when she might be there?”

“Got it. I’ll take measures,” he nodded obediently.

What is that even supposed to mean...?

“Anyway, going back to that friend who was over when I came...”

My heart stopped.

Don’t tell me he noticed!?

“...Yes?”

“Apparently their name is Coro-chan.”

“...I see.”

“What’s Coro-chan?”

“Hah?”

What do you mean ‘What’s Coro-chan’?

“Coroyama? Coroda...? Coroko, Coromi, Coroe... None of them sound like real names. What’s ‘Coro-chan’ supposed to be?”

“Haah...”

The correct answer is 'cornet'.

"Then, I realised it. I had actually just misheard... the boy's name 'Gorou'!"

"..."

To think that he concluded that it was actually 'Gorou-chan'...

I was suddenly exhausted.

"So what do you think of my theory?"

"Who knows..."

"Come on, give me a proper answer, Advisor."

Apparently I had become his advisor.

"If you are truly bothered about it, then why not just ask her? 'So who was your friend Gorou-chan from last time?' If she corrects you and tells you it's 'Coro-chan' then it might be a girl, and if she does not, then it means that they are a boy."

"Hmmm..." he hummed indecisively.

It's me.

I'm a girl!

"Well then, shall we discuss inviting her to a date first?"

"Right! Where would be good?"

His expression had turned bright.

"Hmmm, a place that would constitute a casual invitation... Ah, I know. How about inviting her to study at the library together?"

"Library!? How the hell is that a date!?"

Don't look down on my fantasy library date, damnit!

I began explaining to him that because we were all 3rd year students it was low risk with a high chance of success.

I honestly thought it was the best place for him to start.

Fellow Stalking Horse has already cleared the library date event, you know!

Anyway, as the son of the host he couldn't be hiding in a corner forever, so right after that Kaburagi had to head back.

Oniisama would be taking me back, so we went and had one final look at the sakura together.

Chatting with sensuous beauties in front of the sakura was Imari-sama.

Since he hadn't seemed to notice us, we headed around to avoid disturbing him when we suddenly heard him passionately quote the Kokinshuu anthology.

"A mountain cherry. Through the drifting mists, faintly seen thus there is a lady I long for all the more..."

In the face of the natural talent displayed by the Casanova Village Chief, Oniisama simply clicked his tongue, while I could not help but prostrate myself in awe.

Chapter 209

Today Oniisama and I were going to a French restaurant for some duck.

It was a little late, but this was his White Day present to me.

Apparently the reason he had been so busy recently was because he was given responsibility for a major project.

He really had come back late every day, and even when he was home I often caught him in front of his PC.

It was rough being an adult, wasn't it.

Anyway, since things were finally easing up on that end, tonight he was taking me to the dinner he had promised me.

It was the first time in a while that he had taken me out to eat. So happy.

I put a bit more care than usual into my curls tonight.

My dress was a new favourite as well.

With Oniisama escorting me, I felt like a princess~!

"Sorry that this took so long."

"Please do not be! I know how busy you are with work, so please do not mind it."

Beyond the candlelight, Oniisama smiled kindly in response.

"I do hope that you are not pushing yourself too hard though," I said. "You must take care of your health, Oniisama."

"Thanks. It's just that this project had to succeed. Everyone knows I'm going to take over the company. If I didn't get some achievements on my own, they'd look down on me for being a useless rich kid. I'm hoping that with this I've changed their minds

across the board.”

“My!”

You’re so admirable, Oniisama!

Not just coasting on the fruits of your family, but working hard to make everybody accept you.

That was my prided Oniisama for you!

“I really respect you, Oniisama! As your younger sister I could scarcely be more proud!” I said with a clenched fist.

“You’re exaggerating,” he laughed between sips of wine.

“How is it, Oniisama? The wine today,” I clarified.

“I think you’d like it. It’s not too strong.”

Since he liked it, I had the sommelier take the label off for me.

I was collecting the labels of wines that my family enjoyed.

If my family hadn’t fallen into destitution by the time I was 20, I was planning on trying every one of them.

Oniisama said that the company was going well, so happy days of chugging expensive wines were soon to come.

My past life experience with alcohol was more or less limited to the sour I had at an izakaya.

That’s why I was *really* looking forward to this.

I wasn’t the best drunk in my last life, but I was pretty sure it would be fine this time around!

Hmm, but wow.

Mr. Duck was pretty delicious.

I opened wide for another bite.

“By the way, Reika, how have you and Kaburagi Masaya-kun been recently?”

Guhoh!

The duck was stuck in my throat!

I couldn't do anything shameful in a place like this, so I tried my best to swallow it.

“Are you okay, Reika?”

“...Yes, Oniisama.”

As expected of Oniisama.

Cutting to the chase just as his opponent was about to inhale.

That shook me up.

His interrogation tactics were top notch.

“Even if you say ‘recently’, nothing in particular has changed...”

“Really? But at the flower-viewing party the two of you were pretty close, right?”

So he noticed...

But we were mostly definitely *not* close!

“We do speak to each other, yes, but neither do we particularly like nor dislike each other,” I explained.

I didn't have anything to feel guilty about, but it still felt a little awkward.

I pretended to concentrate on the food and avoided looking at him.

“I see,” he said. “Then what about Shuusuke-kun from the Enjou family?”

Guheh-!

“...Same as the above.”

Give me a break...

I want to talk about Enjou even less...

“He had a pretty girl with him that night. Do you know her?”

“I have heard that she is a relative of the Enjou family...”

“Oh? A relative, huh?”

Oniisama gave a meaningful smile.

Eh? What now...?

“Ah well, if anything happens, you let me know, alright?”

“Yes, Oniisama,” I nodded obediently.

“I’ve been pretty worried recently. You’re hiding so many things from me now.”

“Eh...!?”

I looked up in shock to find Oniisama smiling happily at me.

Oniisama, just how much do you already know...?

Today was Buddha’s Birthday.

At the temple I placed hydrangeas by the Buddha statue.

Lord Buddha.

I am a pious, and diligent buddhist.

Unlike the masses who are influenced by Western culture, I have never celebrated such heathen events as Christmas or Valentine’s Day.

Today on your birthday, I have come to pay my respects to you.

Please, grant me a dreamy romance!

And also a peaceful year at school!

There was an class trip scheduled for 3rd years later on.

That's why it was a big deal who ended up in your new classes.

When I nervously checked the class roster myself, somehow I managed to get both Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan in my class this year!

I don't think this had happened since primary school!

"We're in the same class, Reika-sama!"

"The three of us are going to have a great year!"

"I'm so happy! Please keep looking after me this year!"

We were all overjoyed.

Could this be the power of Lord Buddha at work!?

"But it's a shame that Kaburagi-sama and Enjou-sama are in different classes this year, isn't it~" Serika-chan said regretfully.

Kaburagi, Enjou, me, and Fellow Stalking Horse.

All of us were in different classes.

Maybe this was a deliberate move from the school with the power balance in mind.

It was going to be a rough class trip for whoever was in Kaburagi or Enjou's classes, so I was really very lucky.

Could this be the power of Lord Buddha at work as well!?

Anyway, I ended up as class rep again.

It was pretty much custom by now, so I just stayed silent and accepted it.

My partner was Satomi-kun from my class in 1st Year.

I was pretty happy about that.

Since I already knew what kind of person he was, the job had just gotten easier.

“I’ll be in your care, Kisshouin-san,” he said.

“Likewise,” I replied.

There was one other person of note in my class.

Sitting in the classroom, looking towards us like he had seen the Four Horsemen, was Tagaki-kun.

In the end, Tagaki-kun had been terrified of me the entire Spring Holiday cram course.

I headed over to give him an extra gentle hello.

With Serika-chan and Kikuno-chan, the three of us surrounded the seated Tagaki-kun at his desk.

“Tagaki-kun, I have been entrusted with the role of class representative this year. I trust that you will cooperate with me, no?”

Hmm?

The plan was to speak to him kindly, so why did it come out like I was threatening him?

Um, Tagaki-kun’s complexion had turned from ashen to deathly white.

Serika-chan, Kikuno-chan, maybe if you could stop asking him ‘Capisce?’

Tagaki-kun, don’t cry?

After the opening ceremony finished, I headed to the Pivoine salon.

Greeting the new 1st years was one of the reasons, but another was a message I

received last night from Kaburagi.

‘Went to the library with her today, but had an incident. Details tomorrow, so come to the salon!’

Ahhh geeez~

I guess I was stuck going along with his romance consultations again...

Going back to the message though, Kaburagi had always been the type to immediately put my suggestions to action.

Would I call this being willing to learn, or being an idiot?

When I reached the salon, Kaburagi was already waiting for me.

Chapter 210

Yang Yuhuan , often known as Yang Guifei (literally: “Imperial Consort Yang”), was known as one of the Four Beauties of ancient China. Yang was known for having a full and voluptuous figure, which was a much sought-after quality at the time. She was often compared and contrasted with Empress Zhao Feiyan, the wife of Emperor Cheng of Han, because Yang was known for her full build while Empress Zhao was slender.

Lychee was a favorite fruit for Yang Guifei, and the emperor had the fruit, which was only grown in southern China, delivered by the imperial courier’s fast horses, whose riders would take shifts day and night in a Pony Express-like manner, to the capital.

Also Aoyama is a rich people place.

The new middle school 1st years had their first tea party with us today.

As the president, Kaburagi gave a brief greeting, before the new faces began introducing themselves.

After that we all just had desserts while chatting about our spring breaks.

Speaking of the dessert, it was ispahan macarons today.



The ispahan macaron is a mix of rose cream, lychee, and fresh raspberries sandwiched between two macaron shells, created by Pierre Hermé, a patissier renowned around the world.

The rose, and raspberry, and lychees came together like the dreams of a maiden made manifest.

It was one of my favourite desserts.

Aah! It was so precious and cute that I could hardly bear to eat it.

Truly, a dessert fit for I, the Rococo Queen!

Mmhu!

I was sitting in my usual seat on my own and enjoying the dessert.

Of course, that was when my unworthy new disciple traipsed along.

“I’ll report what happened first.”

Not even a ‘hello’?

Well whatever.

Hm!?

Oi, disciple, you’re going to sit next to your master without invitation?

What is the meaning of this?!

“Coro was a girl.”

I know.

Aah~

The tartness of these raspberries was to die for.

And they looked as lovely as they tasted.

Rapsberries were the best.

“Oi, are you listening?”

“I certainly am. Please continue at your leisure.”

And lychees brought to mind Yang Guifei, didn't they~?

I didn't think I liked them as much as she did though.

She liked them enough to have them brought over the Silk Road, after all~

If I was Yang Guifei, I wonder which food would be my equivalent to lychees.

"I mentioned her friend Gorou-chan to her, just like you said. She laughed and said that it was Coro-chan, not Gorou-chan."

I think I like cherries.

I wish it was cherry season already.

"She's a girl, and Coro is her nickname. What a false alarm."

But when you're eating cherries, it's a bit scary, isn't it?

There's that old wives' tale about swallowing seeds and appendicitis.

I know it's fake, but it's still a bit nervewracking, isn't it~

"Oi."

"I am listening. She is a girl, and Coro is her nickname, you said. And then?"

Kaburagi looked at me in dissatisfaction for a while, but he said "Just listen," in defeat and continued.

"On the last day of spring break, I invited Takamichi to the library."

"I see."

I discreetly surveyed the room.

Somebody was playing the piano right now, and nobody was in our immediate surroundings.

Given how quiet he was being, I probably didn't need to worry.

“Apparently she’d been going there to study almost every day of the holiday. Since that was the case, I casually suggested we go together.”

“Well good for you, then.”

“It was, up til that point.”

Kaburagi’s expression turned bitter from reminiscence.

“When we arrived at the library that she recommended, of all people Mizusaki was there!”

“Mizusaki-kun!?” I exclaimed.

“Yeah. He was surprised to see us too. But it turns out that he was the one who told her about the place to begin with. And that’s not all! Apparently the two of them had already studied together a bunch of times!”

“Aahh~”

Wakaba-chan *did* mention something like that.

“Well what happened then?” I asked.

“The three of us studied together. Aside from a short break at the café there, the rest was just studying. That wasn’t a date; that was a study group!”

“My~”

“To be honest I was planning on inviting her to dinner after that, but when it was closing time for the library she said she had to help out around the house and that was it. I didn’t even have a chance to ask her.”

“Dinner, is it? Did you not arrange it with her beforehand?”

“Yeah, I guess I didn’t.”

What on earth was he doing?

“I mentioned last time that you should be asking her what her plans are first. Where

were you planning on taking her, anyhow?"

"A French place in Aoyama."

"Are you a dumbass!?"

"Aah!?"

Oh!

I accidentally voiced what I was thinking.

"You. Just now you called me a dumbass, didn't you?" he accused me angrily.

Oh dear...

"Heavens, no! I asked if it was Le Café Dumas. You must have misheard me," I insisted.

He was still looking at me in suspicion, so I continued the conversation to distract him.

"You know, Kaburagi-sama, if you suddenly invite a girl to dinner at a French restaurant then she is more likely to be troubled than glad."

"How come?" he asked, clueless.

This guy really was a dumbass...

"Some casual restaurant would be a different story. But a French restaurant, especially a high class one at Aoyama? Suddenly bringing her along in whatever she's wearing is basically a form of torture. A girl wants to look her best when she visits a place like that!"

Looking fashionable is a girl's weapon and armour, you know!

And choosing her outfit in anticipation is just part of the enjoyment.

To be taken there in your casual clothes...

And worse than just lunch, it was dinner.

Looking at all the gorgeously dressed adults around you, and then looking back at yourself.

Would any girl want to stay there?

“It’s not a place with a dress code, you know. I go there in casual dress all the time.”

Your casual clothes blow the casual clothes of a normal high school girl out of the water, you know!

Plus, even if someone like Kaburagi wore rougher clothing, the natural grace would still shine through.

Far from being criticised, girls would squeal over how unpretentious and dreamy he was.

An Emperor like him couldn’t understand the feelings of a commoner.

“You really do not understand...” I sighed.

Kaburagi was peeved.

“What don’t I understand?” he demanded.

“Anything...”

For the sake of Wakaba-chan, I realised I’d have to give it to him straight.

“The way you are going about it is just going to cause her trouble! You have neglected a number of things to begin with. That you need to set a time and date with her beforehand. That you need to explain to her what exactly you even plan to be doing. That you need to respect that she has her own life and schedule. If that is not clear enough, then for example, you should have invited her to a place she would normally visit on her own if you were planning on casually inviting her. If you really wanted to bring her to a fancy French restaurant, then at least let her know in advance!”

Kaburagi stared at me wide-eyed.

I was familiar with what Wakaba-chan liked to wear.

Her casual outfits were cute, normal clothing that you'd find with any regular high school girl.

If she was heading to a library a bit further away, then maybe something just a little more stylish.

Being suddenly dragged to a French restaurant while she still had her bag full of textbooks would just trouble her.

Kaburagi sunk into thought.

He stood there, looking like he was solving a difficult problem for a while, but eventually he nodded.

"I get it. From now on I'll do my best to accomodate for her."

Oh!

He gave in!

Was this the power of love!?

"Kisshouin, what is love?" he whispered to me.

It was the next day, and we had just happened to pass each other in the hallway.

"Hah?"

"What is love, Kisshouin?"

What was this guy on about?

'What is love'?

Was this some koan now?

Love, love...

Oh. Right...

“A star, enshrouded in mist.”

“Good answer,” he nodded.

Satisfied that I had the correct answer, he walked off.

Annoying...

I wasn't sure I'd be able to stand it if he was going to drop these stupid pop quizzes in the future.

I had to quickly find an elegant solution to deal with that poem anthology, or else...

Chapter 211

It hadn't been that long since the school year began, but the class reps were already having meetings to prepare for the excursion.

Speaking of which, we would be going to London, Paris, and then Rome in May.

We were going to be spending 3 days in each.

Usually the first was scheduled sightseeing, the second was free time, and the third was used for travel to the next city.

Quite a packed schedule.

I wonder why they even picked May for it.

The new 1st years were looking for a club to join, so I had my duties as the President of the Handicrafts Club as well.

I grumbled as much to Satomi-kun as we headed to the meeting room.

"But I'm glad I'm doing this with you, Kisshouin-san. Some people really cut loose during the excursion, but they'll all listen to you. I'm counting on you, Kisshouin-san."

So he said, but in 1st Year he did quite a good job himself.

And he wasn't one of those dead serious types, so he had the flexibility for it too.

I'll be counting on *you*, Satomi-kun.

When we arrived, the other class reps, and members from the Student Council were already waiting.

Oh, it was Class Rep.

When our eyes met I gave him a small wave, which Class Rep and Miharuchan next to him returned with a smile.

This year Class Rep wasn't in my class anymore, but managed to make it into Miharu-chan's class. The two of them were the class representatives for it.

Not only that but he had taken my advice on the White Day present.

During the spring holidays the two of them went with Iwamuro-kun and Nonose-san to an amusement park together.

Class Rep had told me all about it in his and Iwamuro-kun's first report since school began.

"Thank you, Kisshouin-san!" he had said. "As expected of my master! You see, the four of us went on all sorts of rides but since I was a bit scared about going on the rollercoasters, Honda-san tried to cheer me up while I was depressed about it. Geez, I really don't have any face left as a guy~ But when I actually did ride them, they weren't as scary as I expected. Just a day wasn't enough to try all the rides, so the four of us agreed to go there again, and..."

The four of them basically had a double date, didn't they.

So jealous...!

Group dating was what spring was all about!

I wanted to try going on a double date to an amusement park too!

In the end I just listened to the two of them talk fondly about the girls, before they handed over a cute set of sweets as both souvenirs and thanks.

Mn, thanks for that. It was delicious.

Anyhow, right now Class Rep and Miharu-chan were happily chatting as they looked over the printouts for the class trip.

Maybe they were planning on spending time together during the second day of the trip.

Unuu, weren't they enjoying a little too much romance?

Had I blessed them too much?

While they were off enjoying themselves, their master was the chief of the Forever Alone village.

Weren't disciples supposed to be a bit more considerate of their masters...?

No, no, a master was supposed to be happy for their disciples.

They were members of the Fulfilling Romance village now; a village separated from mine by a large river...

Although this meeting was mostly to get the class reps familiar with each other, we still discussed group and room allocations, as well as what to look out for during the second day's free time.

Although the groups and rooms were basically split within the class, during the second day you were free to join your friends in other classes, so special care had to be taken to avoid any trouble.

The class reps from Kaburagi and Enjou's classes already looked a little exhausted.

Free time was going to mean a flood of girls about them, after all.

Good luck...

Anyway, what most of my grade were discussing these days was the class trip.

"Where are you going during the second day?"

"Paris is going to mean shopping, of course. There are handbags that haven't made it to Japan yet."

"I was thinking of getting some shoes. Although handbags would also be nice. Got a shop in mind?"

"Let's watch a musical at Piccadilly Circus!"



Piccadilly Circus is a London road junction, close to major shopping and entertainment areas in the West End. It is surrounded by several notable buildings, including the London Pavilion and Criterion Theatre, and is frequently used as a meeting point.

“That sounds amazing! In that case, the Phantom of the Opera would be nice. I saw it in London with my family once, and it was great.”

“I think I’d like to see Les Misérables.”

“Isn’t that a bit dark...?”

“What about a ballet then?”

“I want to watch an opera in Rome!”

Musicals, ballets, and opera?

If we’re watching a ballet I’d like to see Le Corsaire.

And maybe buy some nice stamps for my secret hobby.

Maybe I could buy some at the Vatican City and send some air mail to my friends and family.

But what if I got back to Japan before the letters did?

Changing topics, Moriyama-san from cram school had gotten together with her boyfriend during her class trip.

You do hear a lot of stories about new couples forming on these.

Maybe I'd have a dreamy encounter as well...

I was wondering where Wakaba-chan would be going during the class trip, so I gave her a call.

"The British Museum, hands down! I want to see the cat mummies! I want to see the Rosetta stone! And best of all, the admission is *free*! What a big-hearted country! Hmm, aside from that though, I want to try gelato at the Piazza di Spagna!"



Piazza di Spagna (the Spanish Plaza), at the bottom of the Spanish Steps, is one of the most famous squares in Rome.

It was going to be her first trip overseas, so no wonder she was excited.

"Unfortunately, eating at the Piazza di Spagna might be forbidden..."

"Ehh!?"

Wakaba-chan seemed crestfallen, but you could still see the plaza from the gelato stores nearby.

"Oh yeah! Since you warned me about getting the passport in advanced, all the paperwork went smoothly. Thank you!"

"You are very welcome."

Since I had been to the three cities before, Wakaba-chan listened fervently as I told her

my impressions of them for a while.

“By the way...” I began, before asking her if she made much progress studying at the library.

“Yeah, I did. It was pretty quiet~ Made it easy to concentrate.”

“I am glad to hear that. So you went by yourself?”

“More or less. I did go a few times with Mizusaki-kun though. Oh, and once with Kaburagi-kun as well.”

“My. With Kaburagi-sama?”

“Yeah. Kaburagi-kun suggested we go to a library to study. He didn’t seem to be familiar with any, so we went to the place that Mizusaki-kun told me about. When we got there, Mizusaki-kun was coincidentally there as well, so the three of us found a place to study together.”

“I see~”

That lined up perfectly with what I heard from Kaburagi.

The moment when he was thrust from Heaven into Hell.

“Did the three of you have fun?”

“Well, not so much fun, but it did help with our studies. Mizusaki-kun showed us the questions from his cram school, and Kaburagi-kun told us which textbooks he was using.”

That really wasn’t a date but a study group.

The pitiful Kaburagi.

“Anyways, more importantly we going to make teppanyaki with a hot plate at my house. Wanna join us?”

“Eh!? I do, I do!”

After that we worked out a time.

Teppanyaki~!

Chapter 212

Although the class trip had made me a busy class rep, I wasn't neglecting my duties at the Handicrafts Club either.

It was around the time that new students really began to visit the clubs.

Last year I had just become an official member, so I had gone a bit overboard.

But as the president, this year I was going to show proper restraint and secure as many members as possible.

We needed more boys like Minami-kun!

We sat there, chatting relaxedly about it as we knit.

This place was so soothing~

It would be nice to just chat and knit, without worrying about my troubles ever again~

The world of humans was filled with complications.

Wakaba-chan and Kaburagi weren't in the same class anymore. But in 3rd year, we had even more electives, which was why they did have a few classes together.

Still, the fact that they were separated at all was, and I quote, "Disappointing to the extreme...!" and so to make up for it he would use schoolwork as an excuse to speak to her whenever possible, both before and after class.

Wakaba-chan being Wakaba-chan was more than happy to discuss schoolwork, and so from the outside at least, their relationship seemed to be going swimmingly.

I had been hoping that the Spring Holiday would be enough to cool down the rumours and ill-will towards Wakaba-chan, but from the way Kaburagi was behaving I couldn't see the jealousy dying down.

I was beginning to consider telling him to get his act together and stop talking to her.

He really needed to start thinking about how his behaviour was affecting her.

But they were already in different classes.

On top of that, Wakaba-chan was always busy with the Student Council after school, and it wasn't easy for him to find an excuse to see her on the weekends.

Given all of that, the periods between classes was one of his only chances to talk to her.

He was holding back as much as any boy in love could.

And I'd be lying if I said I didn't understand...

An ordinary boy would never have to worry about what others thought about who he crushed on.

How much he spoke to her, and how often he spent time with her was his business, and his alone.

Kaburagi was already limited in that respect. If I told him, 'You should just give up on her,' it would be really too heartless.

He was an idiot, yes, but he was sincere about her.

Something else that the Spring Break hadn't helped were the rumours around Enjou.

The new year had begun with rampant rumours about how at the Kaburagi Flower-viewing party, Enjou and Yuiko-san had been spotted intimately linking arms.

The origin were probably the few Suiran students who had been invited.

Enjou blew off any questioning with "She's just a relative," but it was hard to see the two as anything but an intimate couple.

There wasn't the sense of them being family at all, was there?

Which was why I was questioned a lot as well.

'Is it true that Enjou-sama was cuddling a beautiful girl?'

‘Is it true that the girl was the same one who came to the School Festival?’

All I could say in response was a harmless, “I *did* spot him together with a girl, but I really do not know much more.”

Either way, they weren’t going to get anything if they were expecting gossip from me~

‘Reika-sama, could you ask Enjou-sama how he feels about that girl?’

As if!

At any rate, Suiran was buzzing with rumours about Kaburagi and Enjou. Business as usual.

Getting used to Third Year, dealing with the class trip, and on top of that being tossed about by the romances of total strangers.

The Handicrafts Club was truly a bastion for my weary heart.

Here I could knit away, forgetting about the troubles of the outside world.

I wish I could rest here forever~

But the cause of my troubles had messaged me with another summons today.

Tsk.

There went my plans of avoiding the salon and staying here all afternoon.

Even if I ignored this message, another would just arrive five minutes from now...

This was basically as bothersome as it got.

I was beginning to entertain the thoughts of dropping my phone into water again...

“You’re late,” he said.

I go out of my way to come here, and that’s the first thing you say to me?

Just how self-centred could this guy get?

I was irritated, so I decided to lecture him a bit.

“Kaburagi-sama. It pains my heart to say this, but I too have plans. I cannot always throw everything away for your convenience. I, too, will be keeping a close eye on any further harassment of Takamichi-san, but for your own romantic troubles you need to put in the effort yourself first. Please only contact me when you need advice. Can you agree to that?”

Kaburagi looked at me wide-eyed.

“Got it...”

His one redeeming quality was that he earnestly took your advice.

“As long as you understand. Well then, what did you wish to speak about?”

“...I don't know how Takamichi feels.”

We were using a small classroom again, so there was no need to worry about being overheard.

“Well, even if you ask *me*...”

“How do you... How do you think I can get her attention...?” our cool and talented Emperor hesitantly asked.

Honestly, you would expect a line like that to come from a lovesick maiden instead.

“I *have* suggested this before, but why not simply confess?” I asked.

“Like I said, it's too early for that!”

I might have imagined it, but I think he was blushing.

“But you want to know how she feels, and you want her to have some awareness of you as a potential boyfriend. Would confessing not be a simply way of accomplishing both?”

“But... But I want the situation to be perfect when I confess to her. I still haven't prepared everything!”

What, was he thinking of doing it on a classroom after school, or in a park during the evening or something?

“Situation? For example?”

“...Like, for example I’d have a few dozen fireworks blooming in the sky, or maybe I could use skywriting to confess in the sky.”

“Ehh!? Those are for *proposing*, damnit! You’re going to go *that* far for a confession!?” I blurted.

The shock was so crazy that I forgot to watch my tone.

But seriously, *skywriting*!?

Like getting a plane to write ‘I love you’ in the sky, right!?

What was wrong with this guy!?

“It’s important. I want her to remember it,” he said without a shred of self-doubt.

“Whoa, whoa, I really, *really* suggest that you reconsider. While I shant deny that there are girls who are moved by that sort of thing, I doubt that Takamichi numbers among them. Far from it I could even see her being creeped out by having that much money spent confessing to her.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really!”

This was the same girl who was gobsmacked just from being given an expensive uniform.

It was hard enough for her to empathise with my sense of money.

Even if she hypothetically had feelings for him, seeing him spend a few million yen on a confession would be a sure-fire way to disillusion her.

“Then what if I fill her whole house with roses to symbolise just how much I love her? Romantic, right?”

“On top of having no place to stand, it would be a pain for her to clean up afterwards. Just how many garbage bags do you think that would need?”

“You sound like a poor person.”

“I am being realistic.”

“Then what if I reserve a hall and have an orchestra play exclusively for her?”

“Again, please stop trying to impress her with money. Takamichi-san was raised in a normal family, with a normal sense of money. The things you suggested just now are more liable to scare her off.”

“What’s ‘a normal sense of money’ even supposed to mean? Isn’t it more like you just don’t have a romantic bone in your body?”

“Absolutely false. At any rate, putting on an exaggerated performance like that would probably work with any other girl in Suiran, but Takamichi-san is different. She already knows how hard it is to make money. If you begin wasting your parents’ money left and right like that it would make her more guilty than happy. And being honest, your ideas were clichéd and tacky anyhow.”

“Aren’t you being a little harsh...?”

“It pained my heart to say it as well, but honest advice is the best way that for me to help you.”

“...Then what am I supposed to do then?”

“Why not simply tell her that you like her?”

“That’s too ordinary. I’d have to at least give her a ring with her birthstone or something.”

“Heavy...! You aren’t even dating yet! And what are you going to do with the ring if she rejects you!?”

“Saying that is bad luck, damnit! As for the ring... I’ll get rid of it. Maybe toss it into the ocean or something.”

“Uwa-! The type that Takamichi-san hates the most are people who don’t value their belongings, you know. And throwing it into the ocean...? Uupftpft...”

“You...”

“Apologies. Well, at any rate, going back to the matter of the ring for a moment, if something like that ever does happen then how about selling it off and donating the money to a charity? It is a very meaningful way of using your money.”

“I wonder if I picked the wrong person to talk to about this...”

Seriously though, a ring?

That sounds like a disaster in the making.

It becomes more apparent each time I talk to this guy just how little skill in romance he has.

“Girls like accessories, don’t they? Hmm... but come to think of it, I never did see her wear the presents I gave her.”

“Eh!? You gave her accessories as a present!? When!?”

And Wakaba-chan never mentioned it either!

“When did you give her such a thing?”

“At Christmas.”

“Christmas?”

I thought he got her a German-made teddybear for Christmas.

It was a bit on the expensive side for a normal girl, but you could say that it was a very sensible gift for Kaburagi.

It seems that I gave him too much credit.

“I gave her a teddybear.”

“Indeed.”

I know.

“So I put a diamond heart necklace around its neck.”

“*Haah!?*”

Was it wearing something like that!?

It was wearing cute Christmas clothing so I hadn’t noticed at all!

“The heart motif was filled with my feelings for her.”

“What are you doing before you have even confessed!?”

“And I thought she might be hesitant to accept a brand-name item, so it was custom made.”

“Who made it...?”

“I did.”

“By ‘I did’, you mean...?”

“I hand made it. I went to a workshop and used lost-wax casting to make it. I put all of my feelings into it.”

“*Heavy!* Even receiving a *hand-knit scarf* would be ten times less heavy than *that!*”

And more importantly...

“Do you think that perhaps she has not noticed the meaning behind it...?”

“Eh!?”

Maybe it was buried beneath the clothing, or perhaps she had taken it off to store elsewhere, but I hadn’t seen any necklace when Wakaba-chan showed it to me.

“No, no, she had to have noticed, right?”

“I wonder about that.”

The Takamichi siblings had all been shocked about the price of the bear.

If it had come with a necklace, they definitely would have mentioned it to me.

“...Don’t tell me that Takamichi really didn’t notice?”

“I cannot say. To begin with, why did you give them to her together like that?”

“To make it romantic.”

It’s just *confusing*, damnit!

If you want to put on a performance like that then you need to pick the right one for your partner!

“Still, a handmade accessory? How on earth did you come by that idea? I must applaud you for coming up with something like *that*.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“Well, in one of Yurie’s favourite movies the guy proposed with a ring he made himself. Which was why each year I gave her an accessory that I made myself. I only started in middle school, but for the first year it was a necklace with a lily motif, since her name is Yurie. The next year was lily designs, but for earrings instead. And when I was going to become a high schooler I thought to give her a lily-themed ring... but...”

Aah, but he was rejected before that.

I guess he must have been remembering the struggles of that year, because Kaburagi’s expression turned dark.

“The centrepieces of the necklace and earrings had Yurie’s birthstone. The ring was supposed to be both of our birthstones around a diamond...”

Diamond? That means it was an *engagement* ring, right!?

I wouldn't be surprised if the reason she suddenly rejected him was because she panicked after realising a ring was coming next.

Scaryyy.

Anyone would want to run away from that.

I was at a loss...

This guy was even more hopeless than I thought...

Perhaps this idiot was beyond my help...

Chapter 213

Tired...

Kaburagi was so much worse than I expected that I was honestly at my wit's end.

After that, even after we returned to the salon, Kaburagi kept talking to me about his ideal confessions.

He was like a bottomless well of worthless ideas.

Naturally he never brought up Wakaba-chan's name, but anyway, all of his ideas were needlessly bombastic and unrealistic.

This wouldn't do.

In the end I concluded that I had to put off the confession for now.

What I needed to do first was teach the idiot some common sense.

Uwah, the road ahead was tough...

"Kisshouin-san, I hear that you've become Masaya's strategist?"

"Haah!?"

Since we were in public now, and I was more than a little sick of him, I had told Kaburagi to think about how to word his confession first.

Having given him his homework, I shooed him off and helped myself to some tea, but this time a smiling Enjou had come to accost me.

"What in heaven's name are you talking about?"

"Hm? I heard it from Masaya. Apparently he employed you as his strategist."

What the hell!? Doesn't that make me his subordinate then!

I've never heard of a disciple this arrogant!

"That position seems much too important for one such as I. You are Kaburagi-sama's closest friend. This role can only be entrusted to you."

"Oh no, I could never..." he waved me off.

Hmph.

That's not something I want to hear from a member of the Fulfilling Romance village like you.

You've got plenty of experience. Can't you just use some of it to give him advice?

"Do you know what it is Kaburagi-sama is asking my advice on?" I asked.

"Yeah, more or less," he said, sending a glance Kaburagi's way.

The boy in question was sitting cross-legged by the window, quietly reading a book.

No doubt it was another stupid love poem anthology.

I could already see him sending weird quotes my way...

While I was thinking that to myself, I heard dreamy sighs from here and there.

They could only react that way because they didn't know what a loser he was inside.

"In that case," I started again, "would it not make even more sense for you to advise him?"

"Why do you say that?"

Because you've got a goddamned girlfriend!

To begin with, I wasn't even close to Kaburagi.

Shouldn't Enjou have been considered for the role before any thoughts came *my* way?

Ah, hang on.

I guess it was because of Iwamuro-kun and Class Rep...

“I think a girl’s opinion would be a lot more useful than mine,” he smiled brightly.
“Kisshouin-san, I’ll leave Masaya to you.”

Even though I had an urna on my forehead, why was this year full of trouble?

Aaah~

What a pain.

While I pondered this on a particularly lazy Saturday, I suddenly received a message from my fellow Pivoine member, Fuyuko-sama.

‘Might we meet for a chat? It would be lovely if we had a chance to better know each other, Reika-sama.’

Being overjoyed at the chance to meet a friend outside of school, I agreed without another thought.

Fuyuko-sama had always been in my group.

Moreover, she was even a member of the Pivoine like I was.

Despite all that though, we never really had a chance to really know each other.

I guess it was because we were on different frequencies.

She really gave off the vibe of an ancient noble.

But maybe today was my chance!

She was inviting me out on a weekend after all.

What if I was about to make a new friend!?

I arrived at our meeting place full of anticipation; a lounge in some hotel.

It wasn’t long before I spotted her, as well as an older woman I didn’t know sitting next to her.

Hm?

Was this her oneesama?

I made my way towards them.

“Fuyuko-sama.”

“Reika-sama!” she exclaimed. “Thank you so much for coming! Please, take a seat!”

“Why, thank you,” I replied.

I sat down opposite the two of them and ordered a herb tea.

“...Umm, so, regarding our meeting today...”

“Ah, of course! You see, I very much wanted a chance to get to speak with you.”

...I see.

I mean, I was happy to hear that, but in that case what was the strange lady for?

I had a closer look at her.

She was wearing a suit, and seemed to be about 25, but she didn't have make up on and looked like your everyday woman.

At least, she didn't look like she was related to Fuyuko-sama.

Seriously, who was this?

I was slightly regretting coming here.

“I've noticed recently that you seemed a little threadbare. It's been on mind for a while now,” she told me.

“Haah, I see.”

“Indeed. Reika-sama, has something been bothering you?” she asked.

“Bothering me...?” I asked. “I would not say so, no...”

“Goodness, haven’t you been having a lot of trouble with Kaburagi-sama and that commoner girl? And you’ve been speaking with him in the salon too. A lot of girls were envying you, but not me. You never looked happy to me.”

“I see...”

She was normally so quiet.

It was rare to see her so animated.

“Umm, at any rate, might I ask who this miss is...?”

“Oh, of course! This is Lady Lyuleiah! A greater *healer*!”

Hah?

Hiilah?

What was a hiilah?

Hira?

I looked at her suit.

As in short for “hira’sha’in(rank and file worker)”?

“*Healer*, as in the English word. A healer refers to a person with the ability sooth and cure. They can use their powers to heal the body and soul!”

“Pleased to meet you. I am Healer Lyuleiah.”

I gave her another once over.

This woman who didn’t seem to have a drop of foreign blood in her was apparently named Lyuleiah.

“...That is quite an unusual name.”

“It is my Healer name. It was bestowed upon me by the Virtues of the Second Sphere when they commanded me to heal and guide the people.”

“Haah...”

She handed me a violet business card.

‘Blessed by the Virtues.

Greater Healer.

Ryu-Rei-A (Dragon Spirit Love)’

Apparently her name was supposed to be Japanese.

“Lady Lyuleiah saved my heart during a rough time in my life. Since then, I have been guided by her teachings,” Fuyuko-sama told me.

“Ah, excuse me,” I called out to nearby waitress. “I would like to order your special for today, the 3-cake sampler.”

There was something really alluring about the idea of trying 3 different little cakes.

“...And lately you seemed to be having a rough time, Reika-sama, which was why I really wanted to introduce Lady Lyuleiah to you.”

Hmm~

For a while I listened to her confusing explanation, but since I never showed much interest, eventually the greater healer glared at me.

“You have been possessed by a fox spirit,” Lyuleiah concluded.

“Oh goodness! This is horrible, Reika-sama!” Fuyuko-sama exclaimed.

“I see...” I replied blandly.

So here it was.

And a fox, huh?

Honestly, at this point I didn't care anymore.

"Unless we promptly exorcise you, your future will contain dark omens and even greater misfortune..." Lyuleiah warned me ominously.

"There is no need for that," I said bluntly. "After all, the spirit that plagues me is not a fox, but a tanuki."

"Huh?"

"The curse that ails me is the curse of the tanuki pup. It is a terrible curse that tanukifies your stomach if you so much as let your guard down. And the worst news is that this curse cannot be broken."

"Reika-sama, what are you saying...?"

"However, I have grown fond of this tanuki, and am prepared to have him with me for life. Annoying perhaps, but quite cute once you get used to him. For this reason, I must decline your exorcism. Dark omens will be crushed, misfortunes conquered, should they ever impede my path."

Having finished up the cakes and herb tea, I gave a confident,

"Well then, gokigen'yoh."

And promptly took my leave.

I had thought Fuyuko-sama was somebody who lived in another world, untouched by our common troubles, but it turned out that she was actually one of *those* types...

Geez...

When I returned home, the evil tanuki spirit was lying in wait with tarts of this season's fruit in order to curse me.

Eei!

Your dark magic tempts me not!

Chapter 214

Today was teppanyaki day at Wakaba-chan's house.

I had some high-grade beef with me as a present.

What do you mean I just wanted to eat it?

"Takamichi-san, please have this meat. If it pleases you, shall we all try some later on?"

"Ehh!? You even brought us high quality meat!? That's so nice~ Wah, so heavy. Thanks!"

"No, no~"

Uhuhuhu, teppanyaki, teppanyaki~

Cooking on a hotplate is teppanyaki~

"Please come in, Kisshouin-san."

"Please excuse me~"

I followed her into the living room where her siblings were already waiting.

"Welcome, Coro-chan!"

"So you're finally here, Coronet!"

"Welcome."

"Hello, everybody. Thank you for having me," I said.

I was basically established as 'Coro-chan' by now

Kanta-kun was standing in the kitchen and making something.

“Kisshouin-san, take a seat?” asked Wakaba-chan. “Is barley tea okay?”

“Yes, thank you. Kanta-kun, what is that you are making?” I asked.

“Milk pudding. You’ll get some too, don’t worry,” he replied offhandedly.

“My, how delightful!” I exclaimed. “*Thank you*, Kanta-kun! Shall I help?”

“No. You just sit there,” he said.

“Okay,” I obeyed.

Kanta-kun’s manner of speaking was a little rude, but he was actually a much nicer kid than he let on.

Huh? What do you mean I’m being influenced by food?

I sipped at the barley tea that Wakaba-chan gave me and just rested for a bit.

Haah~

It was relaxing here.

But there was actually something I planned to ask the next time I came here.

Naturally it was regarding that necklace.

From what I understood, it had been around the teddybear’s neck.

I was scared to ask, but now that I knew about it I had no choice but to do so.

While Wakaba-chan was talking about her studies since the beginning of the school year, I very casually brought it up.

“Say, Takamichi-san? I do recall that Kaburagi-sama gave you a rather cute teddybear, no? It would be nice if I could have another look at it.”

“Eh? Oh, sure.”

Suspecting nothing, Wakaba-chan went to her room to retrieve it.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

Just like I recalled, there was no necklace around its neck.

I stealthily shifted its collar just to make sure.

Nothing.

“It’s really cute, isn’t it? I was pretty shocked to hear the price though,” she laughed.

“Its round eyes are rather adorable,” I said, as I casually patted it down for any sign of metal.

Nothing.

“...Because it was a limited Christmas special it came with a rather festive cape. But other Christmas bears held presents, or came with other accessories. Did this one not come with any?”

“Nothing at all!”

Ehh!?

Then where on earth had Kaburagi’s overly heavy present gone!?

I looked and touched it all over, in every nook and cranny.

Nothing!

“You seem awfully interested in that teddybear, Kisshouin-san,” commented Wakabachan.

“Eh? Ah, well, I do have an interest in handicrafts after all, so I was thinking of making one myself sometime. Sorry for being strange,” I apologised.

I guess I was acting a bit too suspiciously.

“Ohh, not at all,” she said. “I’d forgotten that you were with the Handicrafts Club. Don’t

mind me. Look as much as you want.”

“Thank you... Say, is this a girl? Girl teddybears often come with accessories, no?”

“They do, don’t they. Hmm, I guess the cape *is* a bit girlish.”

“Right...? So nothing else came with her? No accessories or the like...?”

“Accessories? I don’t *think* so...”

“I see...”

But just as I had given up, and handed the teddybear back to her...

“Ah! I remember now. She came with a necklace.”

“Eh!? She did!?”

So there *was* one!

“Yeah. This cute heart-shaped necklace. I’d forgotten that it had come with it.”

“Where is it!?” I exclaimed.

“My sister has it.”

“Natsumi-chan!?”

Why with her!?

“Yeah. My sister really liked it. She’s at that age when you’re starting to want to dress up, right? But I thought real accessories were too soon for a primary schooler, so I gave her that toy necklace instead.”

“...”

Oh my god, Kaburagi...

“Might I see that necklace...?”

“Eh? Sure, I guess. Then let me go call Nacchan! Nachaaan!”

What do I do, Kaburagi?

The price of the necklace, the meaning behind it, Wakaba-chan didn’t notice a thing.

Her little sister came out with the necklace.

“Here you go.”



It was a platinum necklace, with an open heart pavé diamond pendant.

“It doesn’t look like a toy at all, right?”

Natsumi-chan, that’s because it isn’t a toy...

“You’d never think that it came with a toy.”

Wakaba-chan, that’s because the toy came with *it*...

I looked over the necklace in my hand.

When he said he had handmade it I had expecting something a bit less professionally shaped, but apparently Kaburagi was stupidly good with his hands.

I could literally see this in a shop.

You must have really tried, Kaburagi...

I guess all those presents to Yurie-sama must have paid off after the years.

When I spotted the little 'M&W' on the back, I began crying inside for Kaburagi.

This necklace was filled with all of his weighty feelings inside.

Kaburagi had toiled in a workshop to make it.

But after seeing Natsumi-chan wearing it so happily, I just couldn't bring myself to tell the truth.

She really seemed to love it, after all...

Mn.

I saw nothing, today.

See not, hear not, speak not...

Ah, but I ought to at least make sure she didn't lose it or throw it away because she thought it was a toy...

"Natsumi-chan? This necklace came as part of a Christmas special, so this accessory is actually well-made enough that people can wear it. Take care of it, all right?"

"Ehh!? I had no idea! Did you hear that Nacchan? Treat it well, okay?"

"Yeah!"

I was going to forget all about it.

That Kaburagi had designed it while thinking of her, that he had painstakingly crafted it while thinking of her, that he had attached it to the bear and anxiously wondered about her response, I was going to forget all about it.

Unnoticed by the innocently smiling sisters, I silently wiped away the tears in my heart.

Chapter 215

TPO is a Japanese abbreviation of 'time, place, occasion'. It's used in the sense of 'There's a time, place, and occasion for everything'.

I forgot about that tragic present for now.

After returning to the living room I ate the tasty milk pudding that Kanta-kun made while Wakaba-chan and I spoke about the school trip.

She seemed to be quite excited for it, having bought a location guide book and everything.

"I'm so excited. This is my first time going overseas, you know? Hey, Kisshouin-san, did you ever see the changing of the guards?"

"I did. I watched with my own eyes as guards with these huuuuge hats marched down the street."

"I'm so jealous! I wanna see it too!"

Her siblings joined in and we happily chatted together about good tourist spots as they looked through the guide.

When it was about time that we began preparing dinner, Wakaba-chan's mother came back.

"Welcome, Coro-chan!" she greeted me.

"Thank you for having me here today," I said.

Wakaba-chan handed my present over.

"Mum, look at what Kisshouin-san got us."

“My, thank you! Gosh, what good meat!”

Wakaba-chan got up to help her mother in the kitchen while Kanta-kun and I set up the table and brought out the hot plates.

We were using two of them since her family was quite large.

I liked being able to help like this.

It felt like I wasn't just some guest that they still had reservations against.

Maybe I counted as one of them~? Ehehe.

“Hey, Cornet. At Suiran you greet each other with ‘gokigen’yoh’, right? How come you don’t say ‘gokigen’yoh’ then?” he wondered.

“TPO,” I answered.

If I came here and said that, I’d look pretentious.

Life is all about adapting yourself.

But then the twins wanted to hear me act like an ojousama instead.

“Coro-chan, say ‘gokigen’yoh’ for us~?”

“Do an ‘ohoho’.”

So they really *did* think of me as an ‘ohoho’...

The Ohoho Cornet Girl...

I had better pay attention to the way I laughed while I was with them.

By the time Wakaba-chan’s father had come back from work, the cooking was about to begin.

Wakaba-chan, Kanta-kun, and I were using one hot plate together.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed. “There’s a lot of meat today.”

“Coro-chan brought it over,” explained his mum. “The meat on this plate is the good stuff, so try some later.”

“You did good, Cornet!” he laughed.

Their family seemed to be enjoying the meat I brought.

Thanks to that, I was able to eat with fewer reservations.

Mmmmm, food was somehow better when eaten with lots of people like this.

Aaah~ This ponzu sauce was great!

It was a bit nostalgic.

In my old life too, we used a hotplate like this to have yakiniku.

Seeing the normal family in front of me, I couldn’t help but relax and accidentally said “Wakaba-chan” a few times, before hurriedly correcting myself.

Sometimes I just slipped up.

Wakaba-chan didn’t seem to mind though.

I wondered if that meant I could call her that at school too, then...

After having my fill I had to go home.

The Takamichi house was accepting and comfortable so I would have liked to stay, but I had my own curfew and had to hurry.

When I left they gave me some cake to bring back home.

“Sorry that it’s only leftovers.”

Then Wakaba-chan’s father drove me to the train station.

There was nothing more I could want from them.

When I got off the car, Wakaba-chan and her dad waved goodbye and saw me off.

“See you tomorrow!”

I waved back.

Aah, that was fun.

I wanted to visit again already.

While I sat on the train I wrote Wakaba-chan a thank you message.

Since Otousama and Okaasama were out at a party tonight, nobody asked me where I had gone.

I had just made it in time for my curfew, and only Oniisama was there.

“Welcome back, Reika.”

“I am home, Oniisama.”

Oniisama gave a sniff.

“You smell like cooked meat,” he said.

Oh gosh!

To the bath it is!

After washing my hair carefully with some fragrant shampoo, I changed into some home clothing and brought the cake out into the living room.

“Oniisama, I have some cake. Have some with me?”

“Thanks, I will.”

After making some tea, I took a seat next to Oniisama and began eating the strawberry shortcake.

“Say, Oniisama? What kind of friends do you mostly have?”

“Friends? Hmm, I guess the majority of them are ones I made as a student. After joining

the workforce most of my relationships became tied to my job, so it's hard to call them true friends, I guess."

"I see. Then by student days, you mean from Suiran?"

"You could say that. Hmm, besides them, also some people I knew from other schools, or people I hit it off with while travelling. Different sorts."

"I see... Oniisama? Are any of your friends from normal households?"

"By normal households, you mean people from the normal working class?"

"Well, yes..."

Oniisama looked at me for a while, before he eventually replied.

"...I do. After I became a high schooler, I made some External friends, and I have a lot of friends like that from university as well."

"I see..." I muttered to myself.

Having finished eating, I put down my fork and sank into thought.

Oniisama seemed to realise something and patted my head.

"Reika. Don't worry about how our parents think. Don't worry about where they come from. If you think they're worth it, then be with them," he told me.

"Yeah..."

I hoped that one day I could introduce Oniisama to Wakaba-chan.

I was a bit worried about meeting Fuyuko-sama the next Monday, but she didn't really say anything different to me.

Phew, thank goodness...

Hopefully nobody would find out about the things the tanuki spirit had made me do during the weekend.

Still, the person I was even more awkward about meeting was Kaburagi.

At first I had just considered his romance somebody else's problem, but having seen what happened to the fruits of his efforts with my own eyes, I just couldn't help but sympathise with him now.

Thanks to that, it was hard to treat his issues as flippantly as I used to.

God, seeing that necklace was sorrow itself.

If I left that guy alone, he was just going to produce tragedy after tragedy for himself, mark my words.

And the one who'd end up watching every step would be me.

Which was bad, because eventually I'd cry.

Like, seriously bawl.

I mean that necklace was bad enough.

Just how long did he spend making that?

I'd never done anything like that myself, so I didn't know how tough it was, but it had to be like when a girl knit a scarf for her crush.

Well, leaving aside how much heavier the jewellery was, at least...

For my own ease of heart, I was going to have to be a bit kinder to him during our discussions.



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